

# Fighting for liberty, embracing slavery : Tacitus, Annals 1.7.1

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## Fighting for Liberty, Embracing Slavery: Tacitus, *Annals* 1.7.1

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*Abstract:* Hinter Tacitus' auffälliger Bemerkung, dass bei der Machtübernahme des neuen Princeps Tiberius sich in Rom alles in Knechtschaft stürzte (*Ann.* 1,7,1), steckt eine verbale Anspielung auf *Aeneis* 8,648. Dort beschreibt Vergil, wie sich die Römer einst gegen die Wiedereinsetzung des vertriebenen Tarquinius Superbus wehrten. Durch den evozierten Vergleich werden nicht nur die Römer unter Tiberius als unterwürfig blossgestellt, sondern der Princeps erscheint zudem als Tyrann.

The account of Tiberius' reign in Tacitus' *Annals* famously begins with the murder of the exiled Agrippa Postumus on the isle of Planasia (1.6).<sup>1</sup> As the structure of the narrative suggests, Tiberius and Livia were at the time almost certainly still at Nola, where Augustus had died shortly before (1.5). In any event, the new princeps and his mother were not yet in Rome, when, in the first sentence of the subsequent chapter, the narrative shifts to the imperial capital:

*At Romae ruere in servitium consules, patres, eques.* (1.7.1)

Expressive both of indignation and agitation, these words indeed form an “arresting beginning” (F. Goodyear), as Tacitus comes to paint a striking picture of the flagrant compliancy and sycophancy of the consuls, senators and equestrians in Rome.<sup>2</sup> In addition to marking a topographical transition, *at Romae... sqq.* may also be seen as setting up a contrast between Tiberius' apparent intention to involve the senators as peers in political affairs (and Sallustius Crispus' contrary stance that the princeps alone should remain at the helm) on the one hand (1.6), and the servile behaviour of the mentioned groups on the other.<sup>3</sup>

1 *Primum facinus novi principatus fuit Postumi Agrippae caedes* (1.6.1).

2 F. R. D. Goodyear, *The Annals of Tacitus, vol. 1: Annals 1.1–54*, Cambridge 1972, 137 ad loc.

3 R. Martin in Goodyear (n. 2), 137 ad loc. correctly calls attention to the transition from Nola to Rome. His view, however, according to which *Ann.* 1.6 is “structurally indicated as a digression,” is not convincing.

The vivid effect of the verb *ruere* is reinforced both by the historic infinitive<sup>4</sup> and the alliteration with *Romae*<sup>5</sup>, whilst the tripartite asyndeton at the end of the sentence adds further force to the precipitance of the imagery.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, the juxtaposition of *servitium* and (by definition, the free) *consules* alongside the state's two upper echelons produces a pointed paradox.<sup>7</sup> 'Liberty' and the 'consulate' were, after all, the hallmarks of the *res publica* and thus in stark contrast to any form of political bondage or subjugation as implied in the term and (metaphorical) usage of *servitium*. Virtually a truism, this fundamental notion nevertheless marks the very outset of the *Annals*.<sup>8</sup> The first paragraph with its brief overview of Roman history in terms of 'power' opens as follows: *Urbem Romam a principio reges habuere; libertatem et consulatum L. Brutus instituit* (1.1.1).

There is, however, more to the powerful phrase at *Ann.* 1.7.1, for the sentence recalls a verse from Vergil's *Aeneid*:

*Aeneadae in ferrum pro libertate ruebant.* (8.648)

The line is from the famous description of the shield of Aeneas – itself an epitome of Roman history – and occurs in the fourth scene depicting an episode from the end of the regal period and the beginning of the Republic (*Aen.* 8.646–51).<sup>9</sup> This episode involves the Etruscan ruler of Clusium, Lars Porsenna, who was trying to reinstate the expelled Tarquinius Superbus in Rome while her citizens resisted his pressure with force of arms in order to defend their newly won freedom from tyranny. Two individuals among the Romans are singled out for their bravery: Horatius Cocles for his heroic exploits at a bridge spanning the Tiber, and Cloelia who broke her shackles and swam across that same river

4 On the historic infinitive, see U. Rademacher, *Die Bildkunst des Tacitus*, Hildesheim 1975, 61–3. Rademacher 121 also compares *Ann.* 1.7.1 to the similar reaction of the Senate and the people on the occasion of Otho's accession in *Hist.* 1.45.1: *ruere cuncti in castra*.

5 A. J. Woodman, *Tacitus Reviewed*, Oxford 1998, 64 n. 70, notes that "the juxtaposition of the words *Romae* and *ruere* is perhaps intended to recall Hor. *Epod.* 16.2 *Roma ... ruit*, which involves a complicated etymological word-play."

6 The hasty alacrity and subservience is exposed even further in the subsequent sentence: *quanto quis inlustrior, tanto magis falsi ac festinantes, vultuque composito, ne laeti excessu principis neu tristiores primordio, lacrimas gaudium, questus adulationem miscebant* (1.7.1).

7 Similarly, *Ann.* 1.2.1: *ceteri nobilium, quanto quis servitio promptior, opibus et honoribus extollerentur*.

8 Cf. also the remarks made by Claudius in his speech preserved on the Lyons Tablet, ILS 212, col. 1. ll. 24–27.

9 *Nec non Tarquinius eiectum Porsenna iubebat / accipere ingentique urbem obsidione premebat; / Aeneadae in ferrum pro libertate ruebant. / illum indignanti similem similemque minanti / aspiceres, pontem auderet quia vellere Cocles / et fluvium vinclis innaret Cloelia ruptis*. For an analysis of the passage, see R. A. Gurval, *Actium and Augustus: the Politics and Emotions of Civil War*, Ann Arbor 1995, 223–5 and M. C. J. Putnam, *Virgil's Epic Design: Ekphrasis in the Aeneid*, New Haven 1998, 127–8.

to safety. In short, the vignette advertises the establishing of *libertas* and the Romans' dauntless *virtus* in fighting for its preservation. At the same time, it poses a contrast to the incident as described by Tacitus.

To be sure, these events are also to be found in Livy (2.9–13), and like Vergil, the historian conceives Porsenna's assault on Rome as part of her struggle for freedom against the dangers of tyranny.<sup>10</sup> It is even safe to assume that this celebrated incident figured prominently also in other narratives of the historiographical and exemplary traditions, the majority of which are no longer extant<sup>11</sup>; moreover, that it was part of Rome's 'collective memory,' which is to say that – regardless of whatever mode of writing – it was also handed down orally and visually, and formed part of the general historical knowledge.<sup>12</sup>

Yet the verbal affinity between Tacitus' *ruere in servitium* and Vergil's *in ferrum pro libertate ruebant* strongly suggests that the historian specifically had the poet in mind. Both the collocation of *ruere* + *in* + accusative and the juxtaposition of (a form of) *ruere* + a symbolic principle representative of the respective form of government are telling similarities.<sup>13</sup> Likewise, in both passages the citizens of Rome are the grammatical subject of the sentence: *consules, patres, eques* and *Aeneadae* respectively.

The possibility of a deliberate reference becomes all the more likely given that Tacitus is known to echo Vergil's famous epic elsewhere in his work.<sup>14</sup> For instance, an unequivocal allusion to a passage in the *Aeneid* follows only three paragraphs later in *Annals* 1.10.<sup>15</sup> There, in the negative assessment of Augustus, the designation *machinator doli* echoes the *doli fabricator* of *Aen.* 2.264, thereby playing on Vergil's narrative of deceit, invasion and slaughter, and thus insinuating the true character of the first princeps.

10 Gurval (n. 9) 224.

11 In the surviving sources either Horatius Cocles or Cloelia or both are to be found, e.g. in Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom.* 5.23.2–25.4; Prop. 3.11.63; Culex 361; Manil. 1.780–1; Val. Max. 3.2.1–2 (cf. 4.7.2); Sen. *Marc.* 16.2; Sil. Ital. 10.492–502, 13.726–8, 828–30; Quint. *Inst.* 5.11.10; Juv. 8.264–5; Plut. *Publ.* 16.4–7, 19.4–5. On Horatius and Cloelia within the exemplary discourse, see M. B. Roller, *Exemplarity in Roman Culture: The Cases of Horatius Cocles and Cloelia*, CP 99, 2004, 1–56.

12 On the concept of 'collective memory' in Rome, cf. K.-J. Hölkeskamp, *Exempla und mos maiorum: Überlegungen zum kollektiven Gedächtnis der Nobilität*, in H.-J. Gehrke/A. Möller (Hgg.), *Vergangenheit und Lebenswelt. Soziale Kommunikation, Traditionsbildung und historisches Bewusstsein*, Tübingen 1996, 301–338.

13 It goes without saying that *servitium* stands for tyranny and the Principate, whereas *libertas* represents the Republic; on those terms, cf. M. Vielberg, *Pflichten, Werte, Ideale: eine Untersuchung zu den Wertvorstellungen des Tacitus*, Stuttgart 1987. See also E. Lyasse, *La notion de libertas dans le discours politique romain, d'Auguste à Trajan*, *Ktema* 28, 2003, 63–9.

14 The possible echo of Horace in *Ann.* 1.7.1 (see above n. 5) appears to further corroborate the suggested allusion to Vergil and vice versa.

15 M. C. J. Putnam, *Virgil and Tacitus*, *Ann.* 1.10, *CQ* 39, 1989, 563–4, with further examples and bibliography in note 1. See also B. Walker, *The Annals of Tacitus. A Study in the Writing of History*, Manchester 1952, 71–4 and R. Syme, *Tacitus*, Oxford 1958, 357–8.

In addition to such specific verbal links, it is perhaps worth noting that the *Annals* and the *Aeneid* share structural similarities, such as the obituaries at the ends of books<sup>16</sup>, or the ‘delayed preface’ placed in the first book of the epic’s second half (7.37–45) and the Tiberian hexad’s second half (4.32) respectively.<sup>17</sup>

Once the Vergilian intertext is thus recognized as the crucial link between the passage in Tacitus and the historical events of 508 BCE<sup>18</sup>, this confrontation between now and then fully brings to the fore Tacitus’ inherent sarcasm. The contemporaries of Tiberius are not simply compared to and contrasted with any given Romans from the Republican past. Instead, they are pitted against the first generation of Romans which established the Republic. In fact, the two consuls of 14 CE, Sex. Pompeius and Sex. Appuleius, can be seen in direct contrast to Horatius Cocles and Cloelia. Measured by the truly ‘Republican’ ethics of the citizens – both male and female – of the old Republic, the top ranking (Republican) magistrates of 14 CE appear as spineless and preposterous fools, inasmuch as they are the first to swear allegiance to the new princeps (1.7.2)<sup>19</sup>; for while Horatius Cocles and Cloelia are regarded as iconic embodiments of *virtus*, and in particular of *fortitudo*, the two consuls disgracefully display the polar opposite.<sup>20</sup>

The transitory status of Rome in the Vergilian vignette, that is, her transition from the regal to the Republican form of government, is a particularly apt analogy for Tacitus’ intent. At the beginning of his account of Tiberius’ reign, the historian is at pains to demonstrate the renewed political shift and constitutional ambivalence at Rome.<sup>21</sup> The allusion to Vergil adds an intriguing layer of meaning to Tacitus’ description of the affairs at Rome, namely by evoking a suggestive contrast which in turn lends further cynical overtones to the passage at hand.<sup>22</sup> In light of the events in 508 BCE – which eventually resulted in the firm

16 O. Devillers, *Tacite et les sources des Annals. Enquête sur la méthode historique*, Louvain 2003, 129.

17 Cf. A. J. Woodman, *Rhetoric in Classical Historiography*, London 1988, 180.

18 On the chronology, see Roller (n. 11) 28 n. 65.

19 *Sex. Pompeius et Sex. Appuleius consules primi in verba Tiberii Caesaris iuravere (...) mox senatus milesque et populus*. The irony of the present situation (cf. Goodyear [n. 2] 139 ad *senatus milesque...*) is brought out all the more, by the mention of the “old Republic” in the subsequent sentence (see n. 21).

20 Horatius and Cloelia are listed under the category of ‘*fortitudo*’ in Valerius Maximus’ collection (3.2.1–2); Horatius is moreover noted for his love of the fatherland (4.7.2.). Cf. Roller (n. 11) 51 and *passim* on the possible contestation of the exempla’s meanings.

21 Cf. *Ann.* 1.7.3: *nam Tiberius cuncta per consules incipiebat tamquam vetere re publica*. See also the political options voiced in the form of rumors by contemporaries of the failing Augustus (1.4.2).

22 For similar cases of intertextuality importing additional layers of meaning to the text, see Putnam (n. 15); Syme (n. 15) 358; R. Ash, *Warped Intertextualities: Naevius and Sallust at Tacitus Histories 2.12.2, Histos 1* (January 1997); R. Mayer, *A Lost Allusion Recovered: Tacitus, Histories 3.37.1 and Homer, Iliad 19.301–2, CQ 53*, 2003, 313–5.

establishment of *libertas* – a reversal of the same can be witnessed in 14 CE.<sup>23</sup> As the Roman's lack of courage now contributed to the undoing of the hard-fought achievements of their forefathers<sup>24</sup>, the loss of *libertas* also entailed, as it were, the return of a 'Tarquinius Superbus' to Rome.<sup>25</sup> Thus, with the new Principate implicitly portrayed as a new tyranny and Tiberius as a new tyrant<sup>26</sup>, the stage is set for the chronicle of this ruler whose reign is covered in the first six books of the *Annals*.

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- 23 Notice the wordplay generating a circular structure in the very first paragraph of the *Annals* (1.1.1): From its beginning (*a principio*), kings held the city of Rome. After many centuries of Republican freedom, however, Roman history eventually came full circle when Augustus seized power *nomine principis*, but factually as a monarch (cf. Goodyear [n. 2] 88 ad loc.). To be sure, this piece of ring-composition implies that the return to monarchy was already completed under Augustus. In *Ann.* 1.7.1, nevertheless, Tacitus likes to stress the acquiescence of the Romans and their failure to act defiantly.
- 24 In Sen. *ad Marc.* 16 the *exemplum* of Cloelia is adduced to the effect that the comparison entails a reproach of today's effeminate youth.
- 25 See also Cic. *Phil.* 3.8–11. In his address to the Senate, Cicero, holding up *libertas* against *servitus*, calls for a condemnation of Mark Antony as a public enemy; to back up his demand, Cicero compares the present political situation to the circumstances of 508 BCE and the expulsion of Tarquinius Superbus. Cf. also the disagreement in Cassius Dio between Cicero and Q. Fufius Calenus as to how Antony measures up to other defenders of *libertas* such as Horatius (45.31–2; 46.19.8).
- 26 On the portrayal of Tiberius as a tyrant in the historiographical tradition, see M. Baar, *Das Bild des Kaisers Tiberius bei Tacitus, Sueton und Cassius Dio*, Stuttgart 1990, 188–200.