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Tacitus, the *Ficus Ruminalis*, and the Intertwined Fates of Agrippina and Vespasian (*Ann.* 13.57–58)

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Abstract: Tacitus schliesst das 13. Buch der *Annalen* mit einer kurzen Beschreibung des plötzlichen Verwelkens und Nachwachsens des *Ficus Ruminalis* in Rom im Jahr 58 n. Chr., er erklärt aber nicht die Bedeutung dieses Omens. Die Interpretationen waren unterschiedlich. Oft wurde argumentiert, dass dies den Tod Neros und die Thronbesteigung Vespasians ankündigt und somit einen Ausblick auf die Ereignisse von 69 n. Chr. gibt. Hier wird argumentiert, dass der Baum Vespasian symbolisiert, das Verdorren die negative Auswirkung Agrippinas auf seine Karriere und das Nachwachsen das Wiederaufblühen seiner Karriere nach ihrem Tod im Jahr 59 n. Chr. Folglich blickt das Omen nicht über die unmittelbare Zukunft, den Tod Agrippinas im Jahr 59 n. Chr., hinaus, genau wie zu Beginn des nächsten Buches der *Annalen*.

Keywords: Tacitus, *ficus Ruminalis*, Omen, Agrippina, Vespasian.

Tacitus describes events from the accession of the emperor Nero in October AD 54 until the end of AD 58 in Book 13 of his *Annals*, where the final chapters of this book consist for the most part of a lengthy description of events in Germany (*Ann.* 13.53–57), concluding with a description of a devastating fire in the territory of the Ubii that even reached the walls of a recently established colony (*Ann.* 13.57.3). Tacitus does not identify this colony by name, but assumes rather that his readers will recall that he had previously recorded under the year AD 50 that Agrippina had successfully requested the establishment of a new colony among the Ubii and that this had been named after her (*Ann.* 12.27.1). This was *Colonia Claudia Ara Agrippinensium*, modern Cologne. Immediately after his description of this fire within the territory of the Ubii, Tacitus concludes the book with a brief description of an omen that had occurred back in Rome itself once more (*Ann.* 13.58):

*Eodem anno, Ruminalem arborem in comitio, quae octingentos et triginta ante annos Remi Romulique infantiam texerat, mortuis ramalibus et arescente trunco deminutam, prodigii loco habitum est, donec in novos fetus revivesceret.*¹

In the same year, the fact that the Ruminal tree in the Comitium, which eight hundred and thirty years earlier had sheltered the infancy of Remus and Romulus, had shrivelled up with dead branches and its stem drying out, was regarded as a portent, until it revived with fresh shoots.

¹ Text from P. Wuilleumier, *Tacite, Annales: Tome IV, livres XIII-XVI* (Paris 2003) 60–61. The translation is mine.

No fig tree could really have survived in the centre of Rome for eight hundred and thirty years, but that claim need not detain us here.² Of greater interest here is the rather abrupt way in which this isolated notice seems to have been added to the end of this book. At first glance, this could suggest that Tacitus was trying to correct some previous oversight or that he had had a sudden change of mind about how to end this book. So Syme argued that “Tacitus realized that the last item (a mysterious fire in the territory of Colonia Claudia, which he wanted to have for some reason or other) was not a suitable termination. He added the report of a portent at Rome, brief, isolated, and meaningless, and left it there (XIII. 58)”.³ However, this viewpoint has found little sympathy since. As far as its general form is concerned, the sudden withering of the *Ruminalis*, followed by its renewed growth once more, reveals this portent to belong to a large group of similar tree-portents where the withering or flourishing of a tree signifies either the failure or the success of the person or thing represented by the tree.⁴ For example, just before the battle of Munda in 45 BC, Julius Caesar discovered a palm tree while cutting down a wood, spared it as an omen of victory, and took it as a sign of dynastic success when this tree suddenly produced a shoot that grew so much within a few days that it even exceeded its parent in size.⁵ Even more famously, when an eagle dropped a white chicken with a sprig of laurel in its beak into the lap of Livia shortly after her marriage to Augustus in 38 BC, she planted this sprig, which quickly grew into a huge bush, and all the subsequent members of the dynasty used laurel from this bush when they celebrated a triumph, laurel which they then planted again after each of their triumphs.⁶ However, each new bush withered just before the death of him who had planted it, and all the bushes completely died just before the death of Nero, the last member of the dynasty.

In the context of these and similar tree-portents, it is clear that the withering of the fig tree represents some great misfortune for whomsoever or whatever it symbolizes, while the sudden renewal of the tree represents renewed good fortune for the same person or thing. As one approaches the interpretation of this omen, however, one faces two main difficulties. The first difficulty lies in the identification of precisely who or what the tree represents. Given the fact that the tree had allegedly sheltered Romulus and Remus, the founders of Rome, that is, that it was as old as the Roman state itself, it is natural to assume that it may symbolize the Roman state in this instance, so that its withering symbolizes some harm to the

² For a detailed analysis of the traditions concerning the *ficus Ruminalis*, see A. Hunt, *Reviving Roman Religion: Sacred Trees in the Roman World* (Cambridge 2016) 100–120.

³ See R. Syme, *Tacitus* (Oxford 1958) 745.

⁴ In general, see A. Stiles, “Making Sense of Chaos: Civil War, Dynasties, and Family Trees”, in L. G. Driediger-Murphy/E. Eidinow (eds.), *Ancient Divination & Experience* (Oxford 2019) 134–153.

⁵ Suet., *Aug.* 94.11.

⁶ Pliny, *HN* 15.136–37; Suet. *Galb.* 1; Dio 48.52.1–53.3. In general, see M.B. Flory, “Octavian and the Omen of the *Gallina Alba*”, *CJ* 84 (1989) 343–356.

state, while its renewed growth symbolizes the renewed prosperity of the state. However, this interpretation of what the tree represents is by no means certain. For example, it could symbolize the leader of the state, the emperor, or his dynasty, rather than the state itself, a fine distinction perhaps, but an important one nonetheless. Certainly, that is what one finds in the case of other tree-portents such as in those two already described above where the palm tree and its larger offshoot represent Julius Caesar and Augustus and the individual laurel bushes represent each of the Julio-Claudian emperors from Augustus to Nero.

The second difficulty lies in understanding the emphasis within the omen and the implication this has for the timescale of the events foretold. Is the emphasis on the renewed growth of the tree alone? Or does it lie equally upon both the initial withering and the subsequent regrowth? If the emphasis is on the renewed growth alone, then whatever it symbolizes should probably begin almost immediately, in AD 59 or shortly thereafter, since that is how most omens normally operate in literary sources, including Tacitus' *Annals*, predicting events that occur very shortly afterwards, although there are some obvious exceptions also.⁷ However, if the emphasis lies equally upon both the withering and the regrowth, then whatever the withering symbolizes should begin in AD 59 or shortly thereafter while whatever the regrowth symbolizes is necessarily deferred to some later point. In his statement that the withering of the tree was regarded as a portent – meaning an evil portent – until it displayed regrowth, Tacitus implicitly criticizes any interpretation that focusses on this element alone, but this leaves the larger question as to the relative emphasis to be placed on the withering and regrowth open still.

If one assumes both that the fig tree symbolizes the Roman state and that the emphasis within the omen lies on the renewed growth alone, then one is confronted by a major inconsistency between the real condition of the Roman state and the promise of renewed growth because from a political and moral viewpoint the condition of the state began to deteriorate rapidly in AD 59. So Tacitus begins Book 14 with a description of Nero's murder of his mother Agrippina in that year and proceeds to describe a continued deterioration in his behaviour until he eventually provokes a rebellion culminating in the devastating civil-wars of the so-called year of the four emperors in AD 69. Since it is impossible to reconcile this rapid deterioration in the political and moral condition of the Roman state with the renewed growth of the fig tree, one is left with only two choices if one insists that the tree must symbolize the Roman state. On the one hand, one could argue that Tacitus

7 E.g., Tacitus begins his account of AD 54 with a group of prodigies (*Ann.* 12.64.1) signalling the death of Claudius and the succession of Nero later that same year, lists the prodigies signalling the Roman losses in Britain in AD 61 (*Ann.* 14.32.1–2) just before describing these losses, and concludes his account of AD 64 with a group of prodigies (*Ann.* 15.47) signalling the failure of the Pisonian conspiracy in the next year. For a list of omens relating to emperors in particular, with dates of occurrence and the identification of the events to which they refer, see the table in A. Vigourt, *Les présages impériaux d'Auguste à Domitien* (Paris 2001) 22–74.

may be trying to indicate his rejection of the Roman art of divination, if not of Roman religion more generally also, by highlighting the obvious inconsistency between that which an apparent omen seemed to prophesy and the reality of the situation.⁸ On the other hand, one could argue that he may simply be striving for literary effect instead, that is, for the humorous entertainment of his readers, by drawing attention to what he sees as historical ironies, such as the fact that the *Ruminalis* had seen renewed growth just before the condition of the state had deteriorated so badly.⁹ In the latter case, he does not reject the possibility of divination per se, but rather the identification of particular events as truly ominous. In either case, however, one has to wonder whether a more direct, less subtle reading of the evidence is possible, whether one is failing to see the trees because of the wood.

If one assumes differently, such as that the fig tree may symbolize an individual emperor or dynasty instead and that the emphasis within the omen may lie equally upon both withering and regrowth, then one may reach a very different conclusion. McCulloch builds upon the work of earlier scholars who had connected the withering of the fig tree to the death of Nero, that is, to the end of the Julio-Claudian dynasty, and the subsequent regrowth to the accession of Vespasian, that is, to the rise of the Flavian dynasty, when he concludes that “The temporary drying up of the primordial fig tree portends the disastrous events of the years 59–69, including the civil war, and its rebirth the accession of Vespasian and the restoration of order – a second founding of Rome”.¹⁰ Certainly, this interpretation has won some approval.¹¹ Nevertheless, it suffers from several weaknesses that encourage a fresh examination of this problem.

First, as Gwyn Morgan points out, if Tacitus really had wanted to use a tree-portent by which to signal the end of the Julio-Claudian dynasty, “he would surely have exploited the tale of the sacred laurel which, planted by Livia, withered

⁸ See P. Fabia, “L’irrégion de Tacite”, *Journal des Savants* N.S. 12 (1914) 250–265.

⁹ See C. Segal, “Tacitus and Poetic History: The End of *Annals* XIII”, *Ramus* 2 (1973) 107–126. S.K. Dickison and M. Plympton (“The Prodigy of the Fig-Tree: Tacitus’ *Annales* 13.58”, *RSC* 25 [1977] 183–186) follow Segal, adding little to what he has already said. For an attempt to resolve another Tacitean problem by resorting to similar claims of irony, see E. Keitel, “The Non-Appearance of the Phoenix at Tacitus *Annals* 6.28”, *AJPh* 120 (1999) 429–442. In general, see E. O’Gorman, *Irony and Misreading in the Annals of Tacitus* (Cambridge 2000).

¹⁰ See H.Y. McCulloch, “Literary Augury at the End of *Annals* XIII”, *Phoenix* 34 (1980) 237–242 at 241–242. He builds upon previous observations by, e.g., C. Boetticher, *Der Baumkultus der Hellenen* (Berlin 1856) 130; W. Kroll, *Studien zum Verständnis der römischen Literatur* (Stuttgart 1924) 373. Slight variations in this basic interpretation are common. See, e.g., F. Santoro L’Hoir, *Tragedy, Rhetoric, and the Historiography of Tacitus’ Annales* (Ann Arbor 2006) 256 claiming of *Ann.* 13.57–58 that they support “Tacitus’ prediction of a future in which Rome, phoenix-like, rises triumphant from the ashes of Nero’s conflagration and the civil-war that ensues on his death”.

¹¹ See, e.g., P. Waddell, “Eloquent Collisions: The *Annales* of Tacitus, the Column of Trajan, and the Cinematic Quick-Cut”, *Arethusa* 46 (2013) 471–497 at 490–493; J.P. Davies, *Rome’s Religious History: Livy, Tacitus and Ammianus on Their Gods* (Cambridge 2004) 213, 216.

shortly before Nero's death" instead.¹² Some reference to this laurel bush would have been a much more intelligible and appropriate way to signal the end of the Julio-Claudian dynasty.

Secondly, the idea that the sudden withering of the tree should symbolise the events of the period AD 59–69 implies that everything had been pretty good up to that point, which had not in fact been the case at all. Even if one restricts one's consideration of this issue to the reign of Nero alone, the first five years of his reign, which included his murder of his stepbrother Britannicus, dissolute conduct, and his general neglect of the affairs of state, could hardly be described as a model of good government, but simply less disastrous than the period that followed. But why should one's consideration of this problem be restricted to Nero's reign alone? Whether the fig tree represents the Roman state or the Julio-Claudian dynasty instead, it ought to have been seriously sick long before any final damage representing the last years of Nero because of the equally corrupt and repressive regimes of his predecessors from Tiberius to Claudius.

Finally, none of the interpretative approaches surveyed so far properly explains the close relationship between the description of the fire that devastated the territory of the Ubii and the description of the withering and regrowth of the *Ruminalis* at Rome. As McCulloch recognises, the fire that threatens the colony named after Agrippina, and could only be quenched by the beating of clubs and other tools, portends her death the following year by being beaten with a club among other things.¹³ It is an omen, even if Tacitus does not explicitly describe it as such. Hence Book 13 actually concludes with two omens, that portending the death of Agrippina in AD 59 and that portending the succession of Vespasian in AD 69, or so it seems. But why complicate matters by associating so closely together omens that seem to portend two different things? On the whole, one might have thought it more appropriate to end Book 13 with the story of the fire threatening the colony named after Agrippina, since the next book begins with the fulfilment of this omen, and to defer the story of the withering and regrowth of the fig tree until some later point nearer to AD 69, if not simply exclude it altogether in favour of some less premature omen instead.

The answer to the last question lies in the realization that the two omens do not in fact portend two different things, but the exact same event in each case, the death of Agrippina, although they do so with rather different emphases. In order to appreciate this one must remember that Agrippina played an important, but entirely negative role in the career of Vespasian while he was still a private individual. Vespasian's career under the emperor Claudius had initially been boosted by his friendship with the freedman Narcissus and the success that he had enjoyed

¹² See M. Gwyn Morgan, "Vespasian and the Omens in Tacitus *Histories* 2.78", *Phoenix* 50 (1996) 41–55 at 47, n. 21, describing McCulloch's interpretation as "highly improbable".

¹³ McCulloch (n. 10) 237–238.

while leading the *legio II Augusta* during the invasion of Britain in AD 43, but the progress of his career halted between his suffect consulship in late AD 51 and his appointment as proconsul of Africa in AD 63.¹⁴ Suetonius explains this lack of progress after AD 51 as follows (*Vesp.* 4.4):

*Medium tempus ad proconsulatum usque in otio secessuque egit, Agrippinam timens potentem adhuc apud filium et defuncti quoque Narcissi amici perosam.*¹⁵

The intervening time up to his proconsulship he spent in rest and retirement, fearing Agrippina, who still had a powerful influence over her son and detested any friend of Narcissus, even after his death.

In reality, of course, Vespasian's career may have suffered not so much because Agrippina hated him, but because Narcissus was no longer capable of promoting him in the way that he once had, even before his death in AD 54, and Agrippina and her allies at the court now had their own list of favourites whom they wished to promote above all others, although the effect was the same in any case. This being said, though, Agrippina may still have harboured some resentment against Vespasian because of his proposal in early AD 40 that the remains of the alleged conspirators against Caligula, including those of her lover Aemilius Lepidus, be left unburied.¹⁶ What is important here, however, is not so much the complex reality of court-politics during the AD 50's, but the literary tradition that grew up afterwards, the belief that Agrippina had hated Vespasian.

It is my argument, therefore, that the *Ruminalis* represents Vespasian himself, that the withering of the *Ruminalis* represents the sudden stalling of his career during the AD 50's due to the rise of Agrippina, and the regrowth of the *Ruminalis* his return to public life once more following the death of Agrippina in AD 59. A number of minor factors further support this interpretation. First, when Tacitus describes the alleged regrowth of the tree he refers merely to *fetus* suggesting young growth still rather than hardy new branches reaching high into the sky. It is clear, therefore, that these *fetus* represent a new start to a career rather than its peak, some further progression towards appointment as emperor, such as the re-emergence of Vespasian into public life following the death of Agrippina in AD 59, rather than his final appointment as emperor in AD 69. Second, the gratuitous reference by Tacitus to the belief that the *Ruminalis* had once sheltered the young brothers Romulus and Remus reminds one that Vespasian had also sheltered two

¹⁴ In general, see B. Levick, *Vespasian*, 2nd ed. (Abingdon 2017) 16–28.

¹⁵ Text from H. Ailloud, *Suétone, Vies des douze Césars: Tome III, Galba – Othon – Vitellius – Vespasien – Titus – Domitien* (Paris 2002) 50. The translation is mine.

¹⁶ See Suet. *Vesp.* 2.3. Agrippina was forced to carry her lover's ashes back to Rome (Dio 59.22.8) before she was sentenced to exile on the Pontian islands. See B.W. Jones, "Agrippina and Vespasian", *Latomus* 43 (1984) 581–583.

brothers, his sons Titus and Domitian.¹⁷ There may even be a sly allusion here to the jealousy between the two brothers and the fact that Domitian would eventually contribute to the death of his older brother Titus, or so it was believed, in much the same way that Romulus had killed Remus.¹⁸

Finally, the story of the sudden withering of the fig tree followed by its regrowth bears a strong similarity to one of the more famous omens said to have portended the rise of Vespasian to the throne.¹⁹ Tacitus describes Vespasian's own alleged recall of this omen just before his revolt in AD 69 (*Hist.* 2.78.2) as follows:

*Recursabant animo vetera omina: cupressus arbor in agris eius conspicua altitudine repente prociderat ac postera die eodem vestigio resurgens procera et latior virebat. Grande id prosperumque consensu haruspicum et summa claritudo iuveni admodum Vespasiano promissa; sed primo triumphalia et consulatus et Iudaicae victoriae decus implesse fidem ominis videbatur; ut haec adeptus est, portendi sibi imperium credebatur.*²⁰

Old omens returned to his mind: a cypress tree of conspicuous height on his estate had suddenly fallen and, rising again on the same spot the following day, grew back tall and wider than before. The haruspices agreed that this was a favourable omen of great significance, and the highest distinction was promised for Vespasian, who was then still a young man. At first, however, his triumphal insignia, his consulship, and the glory of his victory over Judea seemed to have fulfilled the promise of the omen; but when he had gained these things, he began to think that imperial rule was being foretold for him.

Here again one sees setback followed by recovery, where the falling of the cypress tree parallels the withering of the fig tree, and its sudden rise once more taller and wider than before parallels the sudden regrowth of the fig tree also. It is hard to believe that these stories have not influenced one another in some way, that if Tacitus, or his source, did not invent the story of the withering and regrowth of the fig tree on the basis of the story of the cypress tree, then he was certainly influenced to include it in his text and use it the way that he has done in the expectation that most of his readers would recognise the parallels with the story of the cypress tree and what he was trying to signal by so using this story. In both cases, the tree rep-

¹⁷ K.E. Shannon-Henderson, *Religion and Memory in Tacitus' Annals* (Oxford 2019) 290–292 detects an allusion to Nero's murder of Britannicus in AD 55 in the reference to Romulus and Remus, but an omen should focus on the future rather than the past.

¹⁸ Dio (66.26.2–4) reports that Domitian hastened Titus' death when ill with fever by placing him in a chest packed with snow. Philostratus (*VA* 6.32) reports that Domitian gave him a poisonous fish to eat.

¹⁹ In general, see R. Lattimore, "Portents and Prophecies in Connection with the Emperor Vespasian", *CJ* 29 (1934) 441–446; D. Wardle, "Suetonius on *Vespasianus Religiosus* in AD 69–70: Signs and Times", *Hermes* 140 (2012) 184–201.

²⁰ Text from H. Le Bonniec, *Tacite, Histoires: Tome II, livres II et III* (Paris 2003) 58. The translation is mine.

resents Vespasian himself. In both cases, the harm suffered by the tree, whether its fall or its withering, represents the harm inflicted by Agrippina upon the career of Vespasian.

In conclusion, Tacitus groups his descriptions both of the fire that threatened the colony named after Agrippina in the territory of the Ubii and of the withering and regrowth of the *ficus Ruminalis* in Rome together at the end of Book 13 because they both allude to the death of Agrippina, the event with which he intends to open Book 14. The fire that threatened the *Colonia Agrippinensis* predicts the death itself of Agrippina, while the regrowth of the *ficus Ruminalis* predicts the impact that this death will have upon the career of the future emperor Vespasian. Neither omen necessarily looks beyond the immediate future.

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