

TACITUS AND DIO ON TIBERIUS AND THE TIBER (*ANNALS* 1.76.1, 1.79.1–4; DIO 57.14.7–8)

ABSTRACT

The focus of this article is on a curious episode at the end of the first book of Tacitus' Annals. It is argued that Tacitus here is at his most metaphoric and allusive, allowing a senatorial debate on the possibly prophetic meaning of an inundation of the Tiber to become a debate about the overwhelming power of the river's namesake Tiberius. Parallels from Dio (and perhaps also from Livy) indicate that inundations of the Tiber by the end of the Republic had become prophetic warnings of the rise of the dynasts undermining the stability of the Republic. In Tacitus, procedural anomalies and suggestive wordplay bring to the fore the religious and constitutional issues that in the Senate's handling of this Tiberine prodigium reflect its submission to the ever more oppressive power of Tiberius.

Keywords: Tacitus; Cassius Dio; Tiberius; the Tiber; Asinius Gallus; *quindecimviri*; *gloria*; bookendings

The focus of this article is on Tacitus' presentation of a debate in the Senate concerning an inundation of the Tiber. The debate took place in A.D. 15, under Tiberius. The question was whether or not this flooding had prophetic significance. Should not the Sibylline scrolls be consulted? Unusually, the motion was vetoed by Tiberius.

To understand this episode there is a historiographical tradition (primarily as known from Dio) to be examined. To what extent is Tacitus presupposing such traditions? And if so, how do they relate to his portrayal of Tiberius in this episode?

To answer these questions, a brief look at the immediate context is essential. In Tacitus' *Annals* (1.55–81), the year A.D. 15 (the first of Tiberius' reign) has a notable narrative structure: its first half is entirely devoted to external warfare led by Germanicus. It is only at the end of Book 1—and of the year—that the historian returns to focus on events in Rome.¹ This narrative sequel deliberately disrupts chronology and brings what timewise came first into a very secondary position, a radical reordering that makes it possible for Tacitus first to showcase Germanicus in his unrivalled military glory and then, in striking contrast, to depict (what Tacitus saw as) Tiberius' devious undermining of the constitutional foundations of the *res publica*.

In this latter Tiberian section, there is, as rightly observed by Judith Ginsburg, 'a curious mixture of reporting and editorial comment'.² The first *maiestas* trials, the games in the Circus, the appointments of new governors for the provinces, and the reform of the consular elections—in narrating these episodes, Tacitus invariably broadens the perspective to suggest how each instance foreshadows subsequent developments in Tiberius' increasingly sinister relations with Senate and people.

¹ I am grateful to the editors and a reader for helpful suggestions. As for narrative sequel, note, for instance, that the year starts at *Ann.* 1.55.1, but events on 1 January in Rome are not reported until 1.72.1 (Tiberius' refusal to allow his *acta* to be affirmed by oaths).

² J. Ginsburg, *Tradition and Theme in the Annals of Tacitus* (New York, 1981), 72.

Among these urban episodes there is one, as a rule side-lined, for which Tacitus' editorial comment has raised surprisingly little curiosity, apart from it being censored as unfair; as I wish to show, this episode and Tacitus' comment merit far more scrutiny than they have hitherto been accorded.

As mentioned above, the episode features an inundation of the Tiber, probably in early A.D. 15, which was followed by a debate in the Senate suggesting a consultation of the Sibylline books.³ The proposal was vetoed by Tiberius, however, the inundation instead leading to the setting up of a committee looking into hydrotechnical ways of avoiding such future floodings. Some chapters later, as is often the case with Tacitus' record of such Senate reports, we get the response of the concerned parties, *in casu* those potentially being affected by the proposed readjustments to the course of the Tiber.⁴

What seems arresting is Tacitus' comment on why Tiberius refused the petition (by a very senior fellow *quindecimuir*)⁵ to consult the Sibylline oracles: 'Tiberius, with his preference for secrecy—in heavenly as in earthly matters—demurred' (*renuit Tiberius, perinde diuina humanaque obtegens*).⁶

This is a reaction that calls for comment. That Tiberius was seen as secretive is well attested—but the claim that he extended such secrecy to heavenly matters has only recently begun to be taken seriously.⁷ At Rome, inundations of the Tiber were of course fairly frequent⁸ and the floods—or the timing and context—were sometimes of a nature that seemed to call for religious action, with the *quindecimuir* consulting the Sibylline Books and/or decreeing *supplications* to appease the gods.⁹ In such cases, the river was

³ Tacitus (himself a *quindecimuir*) is careful to use the proper traditional formula for 'consulting' (*adire*) the Sibylline books: *Ann.* 1.76.1 *ut libri Sibyllini adirentur*; 15.44.1 *aditi ... Sibyllae libri*; cf. Macrobius *Sat.* 1.17.29 (quoting [M.] Laelius Augur, probably the friend of the younger Scipio Africanus: *RE* s.v. 'Laelius' 3); Censorinus, *DN* 17.8 (quoting Varro). Livy also adheres to this traditional usage: 5.13.4, 22.9.7, 36.37.4, 41.21.10.

⁴ Splitting a senate debate up in its proper two sections: Tac. *Ann.* 3.32, 3.35, 3.58–9, 3.71.2 with R. Syme, *Tacitus* (Oxford, 1958), 279–80; Ginsburg (n. 2), 70, 119.

⁵ Born c.38 B.C., Asinius Gallus was a *quindecimuir* already in 17 B.C., doubtless a sign of Augustus' and Agrippa's (cf. n. 44 below) high approval: *ILS* 5050.

⁶ Tac. *Ann.* 1.76.1 (translation: M. Grant, *Tacitus. The Annals of Imperial Rome* [Harmondsworth, 1971]). When not otherwise specified, translations are in the following my own.

⁷ K.E. Shannon-Henderson, *Religion and Memory in Tacitus' Annals* (Oxford, 2019), 25–9 rightly sees the episode as 'paradigmatic' (29) in so far as Tiberius deprives the Senate of its traditional role in handling prophecy.

⁸ J. Le Gall, *Recherches sur le culte du Tibre* (Paris, 1953), 62–6; G.S. Aldrete, *Floods of the Tiber in Ancient Rome* (Baltimore, 2007), 294–6.

⁹ Inundations not resulting in (known) religious activity; Oros. 4.11.6 (241 B.C.); Livy 24.9.6 (215 B.C.), 30.26.5 (203 B.C.), 38.28.4 (189 B.C.); Dio 54.25.2 (13 B.C.), 58.26.5–27.1 (A.D. 36). Sibylline books consulted because of the Tiber's (a) freezing or (b) flooding: (a) Livy 5.13.1–5; (b) Livy 35.9.2–5 (193 B.C.); flooding in 54 B.C. (Dio 39.61.1–4) was widely seen as a portent, worsening a crisis leading to the consultation of the Sybils: Cic. *QFr.* 3.7.1 (54 B.C.) with H.W. Parke, *Sybils and Sibylline Prophecy in Classical Antiquity* (London and New York, 1988), 190–215 and J. Osgood, 'Dio and the voice of the Sybil', in J. Osgood and C. Brown (edd.), *Cassius Dio and the Late Roman Republic* (Leiden and Boston, 2019), 197–214. *supplicatio* or other religious measures because of Tiber floods: Livy 7.3.1 (363 B.C.), 30.38.10 (202 B.C.), 35.21.5 (192 B.C.); further Tiber floods seen as portents: Livy 4.49.2 (414 B.C.); Dio 53.20.1 (27 B.C.), 53.33.5 (23 B.C.), 54.1.1 (22 B.C.), 55.22.3 and, probably, Aufidius Bassus, *FRHist* F 4, who mentions the *miseranda clades hominum domorumque* caused by the flood in A.D. 5, 56.27.4 (A.D. 12) (J.P. Davies, *Rome's Religious History: Livy, Tacitus and Ammianus on their Gods* [Cambridge, 2004], 190 seems mistaken when claiming that the latter episode led to the consultation of the Sybils; but the *ludi* were repeated); for further floodings seen as portents, see Dio 57.14.7–8; Tac. *Ann.* 1.76.1 (A.D. 15); Dio 58.26.5–27.1 (A.D. 36).

seen as a ‘prophet’ (*uates*) of sorts.¹⁰ But, for some reason, Tiberius did not want to acknowledge, let alone discuss, this particular prophecy, Tacitus even claiming that the reaction was deliberate. This verdict has been variously interpreted. On an extreme reading, ‘These words can be dismissed as one of [Tacitus’] many unfounded and malicious comments on Tiberius’ actions’,¹¹ a dismissal then qualified with reference to Tiberius’ repeated interventions to ban spurious prophecy, of the Sibyls and otherwise.¹² However, this concession seems to miss a crucial point. The interventions against spurious prophecy would presuppose respect for the genuine. Still, when C. Asinius Gallus, himself a *quindecimuir*, suggests following a centuries-old procedure of consulting the *genuine* Sibylline books in response to the Tiber’s flooding, Tiberius resolutely interposes his veto.

In Dio, there is no reference to Asinius Gallus (such detailed reference to personal intervention is much less frequent in Dio than in Tacitus): instead the episode (without reference to a debate in the Senate) is cast as having Tiberius as the protagonist deeming it all (in Furneaux’s apt phrase) ‘a case for the engineer rather than the prophet’.¹³

But for Tacitus, closer to the events and with deep knowledge of the protagonists involved, the situation was more complex. First, he probably guessed what motivated Asinius Gallus’ proposal. By late A.D. 14, during the embarrassing accession debate, Gallus had already established himself as a senator keen on dragging Tiberius into constitutional quicksand, thereby laying bare what he saw as the emperor’s political hypocrisy. Furthermore, the aim of Gallus was, according to Ronald Syme, to ‘embarrass the government’. Indeed, his proposal was ‘insidious’, perhaps arising from an awareness ‘that nothing propitious for a new reign was likely to emerge’.¹⁴ So Tiberius had good reason to be cautious.¹⁵ As we shall find, Tiberius could no doubt easily see the risks in accepting Asinius Gallus’ proposal—and so, I shall argue, could Tacitus and his readers. An open discussion of what the flooding might intimate was the last thing Tiberius would want. There were episodes from recent history clearly illustrating the need to control access to the Sibyls and not allow the Senate to embark on a debate about their prophecies.¹⁶

¹⁰ *quin immo uatis [sc. Tiberis] intelligitur potius ac monitor auctu semper religiosus uerius quam saeuus*, Plin. *NH* 3.55.

¹¹ F.R.D. Goodyear, *The Annals of Tacitus Books 1–6, Vol. II (Annals 1.55–81 and Annals 2)* (Cambridge, 1981), on *Ann.* 1.76.1.

¹² Intervention against spurious Sibylline prophecy: Dio 57.18.4–5 (A.D. 19); Tac. *Ann.* 6.12.2 (A.D. 32); against soothsayers: Aufidius Bassus, *FRHist* F 4; Tac. *Ann.* 2.32.3; Dio 57.15.8 (A.D. 16) with A. Pettinger, *The Republic in Danger. Drusus Libo and the Succession of Tiberius* (Oxford, 2012), 17–27; Suet. *Tib.* 63.1.

¹³ Tiberius’ belief: ἐκεῖνος [sc. Tiberius] ... νομίσας, Dio 57.14.8; ‘engineer’: H. Furneaux, *The Annals of Tacitus*, vol. I (Oxford, 1896), on *Ann.* 1.76.1; similarly, R. Seager, *Tiberius* (London, 2005²), 124. Compare the flooding in 54 B.C., seen by some as having natural causes but by most as a portent: Dio 39.61.1–3.

¹⁴ ‘embarrass’: Syme (n. 4), 281; the proposal ‘insidious’: R. Syme, *The Augustan Aristocracy* (Oxford, 1986), 130; ‘nothing propitious’: R. Syme, *Roman Papers*, vol. IV (Oxford, 1988), 215–16; similarly, E. Koestermann, *Cornelius Tacitus. Annalen*, vol. I (Heidelberg, 1963), ad loc. and D.C.A. Shotton, ‘Tiberius and Asinius Gallus’, *Historia* 20 (1971), 443–57, at 448.

¹⁵ B. Levick, *Tiberius the Politician* (London, 1976), 105, however, sees Gallus’ suggestion as flippant and ‘sarcastic’; similarly, ead., *Augustus. Image and Substance* (Pearson, 2010), 145 on the ‘inadequacy (or impertinence)’ of Gallus’ advice. A.B. Bosworth, ‘Tacitus and Asinius Gallus’, *AJAH* 2 (1977), 173–92, at 175 suspects Tacitus of inventing a conflict, where there was none; the context does not seem to support these views.

¹⁶ Control: Dio 39.15.3–16.1 (56 B.C.), 54.17.2 (18 B.C.); Suet. *Aug.* 31.1 (further measures in 12 B.C.). The contentious affair in 57–54 B.C. with a Tiber flood and a consultation of the Sibyls, who opposed the

In short, Tacitus' comment seems far from 'unfounded'. But in order to comprehend on what it is based we need to focus on a strangely neglected issue: what exactly is Tacitus claiming that Tiberius is hiding? Or, to rephrase the question in its proper religious terms: what is the Tiber intimating that Tiberius did not want the *quindecimviri* to start investigating?

Two verdicts seem crucial: in Dio's account of the episode (57.14.7), the Tiber flooding was by 'most people' actually taken to be a prophecy. As in Tacitus' account, there was also in Dio's sources a contrast between a prophecy that was not investigated and the more pragmatic referral of the issue to a hydrotechnical committee.

So what was the prophecy's forecast? Since the Sibylline books are not extant, there are no clear, contemporary indications. But analogy can be invoked.

DIO AND THE HISTORIOGRAPHICAL TRADITION

Three historiographical parallels seem to provide solid footing. Dio (37.58.3–4) records a Tiber flooding in 60 B.C. that laid bare the criminal aims of the secret agreement between Pompey, Caesar and Crassus later known as the First Triumvirate. This 'conspiracy' (thus the stern terminology apparently used by Livy)¹⁷ was unknown to contemporaries, but Dio claims that divine intervention¹⁸ ensured that a deadly inundation (also listed by Livy as a *prodigium*)¹⁹ disclosed the dangers eventually to be encountered by the conspirators themselves as well as by the body politic. Placed at the very end of Dio's Book 37, this prophecy of looming disaster for all involved is in historiographical terms of impressive bookend effect.

Dio's next Tiber flooding is likewise an advertisement of momentous change. It occurred in 27 B.C., on the very night in January following the solemn conferral of the name of Augustus to 'the son of the god' (16 January 27 B.C.); on 17 January, which was the wedding anniversary of Livia and Augustus, a date that later came to be assiduously celebrated, the whole city of Rome was inundated. Since flooding usually heralded misfortune, the incident would for Augustus have been an 'embarrassment' (as it has rightly been observed).²⁰ However, soothsayers were at hand to give the whole affair a positive spin, declaring that it showed how Augustus would rise high and rule over the city. Such cosmic imagery has numerous prophetic parallels. And the link between

homecoming of King Ptolemy, had deeply divided the Senate: Dio 39.61.1–3; Cic. *QFr.* 3.7.1 (54 B.C.) with Parke (n. 9), 207–9 and Osgood (n. 9), 197–214.

¹⁷ The Triumvirate a 'conspiracy to attack the republic' (*rem publicam inuadere conspiratio*): Livy, *Per.* 103.

¹⁸ The flood sent by τὸ δαμόνιον: Dio 37.58.2 (Dio's usual word for the powers above: 42.17.1, 43.35.2, 45.4.4, 47.40.1, 51.17.4).

¹⁹ Almost all the aspects of the flood and *prodigia* listed by Dio 37.58.3–4 (tornado, trees uprooted, houses ruined, inundation, destruction of bridge and loss of human life) were also in Livy (whose *prodigia* for that year are listed in Obs. 62); on the clear signs in composition and structure of Dio's reliance on annalistic predecessors, see P.M. Swan, *The Augustan Succession: An Historical Commentary on Cassius Dio's Roman History Books 55–56 (9 B.C.–A.D. 14)* (Oxford, 2004), 17–26; many such floods probably featured in other pre-Tacitean historians as well.

²⁰ Dio 53.20.1; 'embarrassment': I. Becher, 'Tiberüberschwemmungen: Die Interpretation von Prodigien in augusteischer Zeit', *Klio* 67 (1985), 471–9, at 474–5; J.W. Rich, *The Augustan Settlement. Roman History 53.1–55.9* (Warminster, 1990), ad loc.; Becher (this note), 477 and Rich (this note), ad loc. plausibly suspect that punning on *augere* and Augustus (cf. n. 32 below) was part of the positive spin.

flooding and a date of fundamental importance for the establishment of the new order is again a feature that adds to the weight of the motif.

Finally, Dio (53.33.5) concludes the momentous year 23 B.C. (disease and recovery of Augustus, death of Marcellus, grant of permanent tribunician power to Augustus) with yet another inundation that was seen as a sign of fundamental but unspecific importance. As in Book 37, the flood's position at the very end of Book 53 is in historiographical terms an aspect that strongly adds to its impact.

Sadly, these antecedents are primarily known from Dio, an authority post-dating Tacitus by more than a century. But on the First Triumvirate, Livy—and, of course, Asinius Pollio—are only among the first endorsing the very hostile reading of the Triumvirate as a criminal conspiracy with deadly implications, not just for the three conspirators but also for the *res publica*.²¹ Neither is Dio the first to record the sinister implications of the flooding of that year. In Livy the flood also figured as a *prodigium*—whether Dio took over this momentous aspect from him or from some other historian. As for the link between the so-called settlement of January 27 B.C. and a flood of the Tiber, it looks too memorable a *Leitmotiv* to be something invented by Dio. The First Triumvirate had ensured the meteoric rise of the father, now the (adoptive) son followed in his footsteps, the Tiber in both cases rising high. Given the intimate links between the city and its river, in legend as well as in history, this may well have come across as the eponymous river's own warning against, or—on a positive spin—salutation of, its new master. The same applies to the flood in 23 B.C.

In A.D. 15 the new master was Tiberius. Given the prophetic fondness for telling homonyms, it is in this context crucial that the Tiber, originally called Albula, had in olden times been renamed *Tiberis* in honour of the legendary king *Tiberius* Silvius.²² Less poetically, Tiberius is of course a name declaring him to be 'of the Tiber'.²³ In the historiographical and religious traditions, focus on the telling homonym was no doubt at work, not only when the Tiber flooded in A.D. 15 but also in A.D. 36, when Dio (58.26.5–27.1) records a new Tiber flooding as an *omen* prefiguring Tiberius' death. The hostile jingle *Tiberi(um) in Tiberim* ('To the Tiber with Tiberius!') with which the plebs saluted the tyrant's demise (Suet. *Tib.* 75.1) suggests that the connection was very much in the air.

To conclude: bringing together the Tiber *prodigia* recorded by Dio, it looks plausible that the pre-Tacitean historiographical tradition concerning the Julio-Claudian usurpation at highly significant points in time had focussed on Tiber inundations that in rumour, in the verdicts of prophets and soothsayers and, ultimately, in historians had acquired deep and added significance by becoming markers briefly suspending the narrative present and allowing readers to look into autocratic future that lay ahead: the First Triumvirate of 60 B.C., the settlements of 27 and 23 B.C. and finally the first year in which Tiberius had been sole ruler. On this reading Dio reflects a

²¹ On the First Triumvirate in Asinius Pollio and other sources, see now A. Drummond in *FRHist* vol. I (Oxford, 2013), 437–43 (with bibliography); cf. Vell. Pat. 2.44.1 *inita potentiae societas, quae urbi orbique terrarum nec minus diuerso quoque tempore ipsis exitiabilis fuit*, Flor. 2.13.8 *sic igitur Caesare dignitatem comparare, Crasso augere, Pompeio retinere cupientibus, omnibusque pariter potentiae cupidis de inuadenda re publica facile conuenit*.

²² L. Cincius Alimentus, *FRHist* F 6; Lutatius Catulus, *FRHist* F 5. Varro, *Ling.* 5.30, Ov. *Met.* 14.614–16, *Fast.* 2.390, Livy 1.3.8 and Serv. ad Verg. *Aen.* 8.330 list further such legendary etymologies.

²³ G.D. Chase, 'The origin of Roman praenomina', *HSPH* 8 (1897), 103–85, at 154 quotes Incerti auctoris, *De praenominibus* 6 *Tiberii uocitari coeperunt, qui ad Tiberim nascebantur*.

tradition that long since had been established and that Tacitus at this juncture presupposes. Who knows, perhaps the emphatic position of floodings at bookends was a component of a tradition that he here, quite wilfully, follows?

In any case, Tacitus casts the *prodigium* in suitably traditional language, with clear echoes of Livy and earlier historians.²⁴ The beginning *eodem anno* is also how Livy sometimes opens a list of prodigies. And, as usual, the river had flooded the city's *plana*,²⁵ but in the report there is a sinister extra: the flooding had resulted in the 'deaths of people' (*hominum strages*)—not an altogether auspicious *omen* for the new reign.²⁶ It is therefore not surprising if Tiberius wanted entirely to downplay the prophetic character of the incident.

TIBERIUS' REACTION

The Tiber had at first caught Tiberius out, as it were. Just as in 60, 27 and 23 B.C. a new inundation heralded a new autocratic usurpation. Asinius Gallus, Tiberius' unrelenting challenger (and, no less irksome, second husband of his much-missed Vipsania), had been quick to move in trying to give the issue a public voice. By appealing to a centuries-old procedure, he asked the Senate what the Board of *quindecimviri*, indeed, what the Sibyls had to say. But Gallus was outwitted by Tiberius' outright refusal to consider the flooding a prophecy. Instead the emperor made the Senate agree to appoint a committee headed by two of his *reliable* friends, C. Ateius Capito and Lucius Arruntius. Both had competences in religious matters, but this was in this case immaterial: their brief was to look into the hydrotechnical aspects of the matter.²⁷ Asinius Gallus, who had been in charge of the Tiber's riverbed years before, was, quite strikingly, not asked to join.²⁸

Time passes, until the Senate hears of the Tiber committee's findings. Three chapters later, envoys representing the communities that would be affected by redirecting the course of the Tiber's tributaries are given a hearing. In a cornucopia of decorative geographical detail, the arguments against depriving the Tiber of its tributaries—the Nera, the Chiana and the Velino—are solemnly listed. Indeed, 'Nature had disposed

²⁴ Shannon-Henderson (n. 7), 27 focusses on parallels with Livy; but note the instances quoted in nn. 3 (Laelius and Varro) and 12 (Aufidius Bassus).

²⁵ For *eodem anno*, Tac. *Ann.* 1.76.1 and similarly *Ann.* 13.58.1; cf. *eodem anno prodigia aliquot*, Livy 26.23.4; similarly 5.32.6, 7.6.1; for Tac. *Ann.* 1.76.1 *Tiberis plana urbis stagnauerat*, cf. Livy 35.9.2 *Tiberis loca plana urbis inundauit*; 38.28.4 *Tiberis ... plana ... urbis inundauit*.

²⁶ Floods in 60 and 54 B.C. and A.D. 5 had also caused loss of lives—and had widely been seen as signs of divine anger: Dio 37.58.2–4, 39.61.1–3; Aufidius Bassus, *FRHist* F 4.

²⁷ Arruntius was likewise a senior *quindecimvir*: *ILS* 5050; Ateius Capito had in 17 B.C. interpreted an oracle in a manner proving that the date for the *ludi saeculares* was correct: Zos. 2.4. For Tiberius, Arruntius and Ateius, see Syme (n. 14 [1986]), 97, 431 and *passim*; Dio 57.14.8 further records the establishment of a committee responsible for regulating the Tiber; it had five members chosen by lot: Aldrete (n. 8), 201; it has been assumed that Dio misdates its establishment (Syme [n. 4], 691), but such doubts seem unnecessary: Aldrete (n. 8), 199; C. Mallan, 'A historical and historiographical commentary on Cassius Dio's *Roman History* Book 57.1–17.8' (Diss., University of Oxford, 2015), ad loc. (consulted 4 March 2020 at <https://ora.ox.ac.uk/objects/uuid:6ed64b29-f881-4de2-a647-6212cf0dc7c0>).

²⁸ Gallus' inspection of the Tiber in 8 B.C. is epigraphically well attested: Levick (n. 15), 105; H.I. Flower, *The Art of Forgetting, Disgrace & Oblivion in Roman Political Culture* (Chapel Hill, 2006), 144 (twenty-two known boundary markers).

all for the best of mankind' (*optime rebus mortalium consuluisse naturam*).²⁹ Local cults and ancestral ritual are further invoked—and, in language increasingly solemn, the Tiber himself is finally quoted as pronouncing his view: *quin ipsum Tiberim nolle prorsus accolis fluuiis orbatum minore gloria fluere* (indeed, 'Tiber himself does not want to flow, bereft of his neighbour rivers, with diminished glory').³⁰

In Tacitus, a personified speaking river is without parallel. Virgil (*Aen.* 8.36–65) has Tiberinus, alias Thybris, speaking, but since then it seems rare in the extreme that the Tiber himself speaks out. The seemingly technical report about the Tiber has, with a sprinkling of the allusive wordplay now acknowledged as part of Tacitus' vocabulary,³¹ deftly been transformed into a report about Tiberius himself. Like his namesake, Tiber (*Tiberi[u]m*) does 'not want' (*nolle*) his powers to be diminished, and will—despite appeals to the opposite—not forgo any part of his *gloria*.

TIBERIUS' GLORIA

In relation to Tiberius, the emphasis on the Tiber's *gloria* is spot on. None of Tacitus' emperors is as focussed on his proper *gloria* as is Tiberius. When Germanicus won glory (*gloria*), Tiberius was worried.³² Quoting a *speech* to the senators, in which he 'bragged'³³ about the birth of his twin grandsons, Tacitus adds that Tiberius 'was in the habit of turning everything into his own glory (*gloria*), even accidents';³⁴ addressing the same audience, he once compared his *gloria* with that of the generals of old.³⁵ His *letters* to the House have passages of similar tenor: once, when honours voted by the Senate had caused his displeasure, his reply *vaunted* 'that he was not himself so lacking in *gloria*' as to need what the Senate offered.³⁶ In another case, Tiberius rejected a law proposal that, as he wrote, would give others *gloria* and leave him with the obloquy of the adverse consequences.³⁷ At the end of his reign, the aid for

²⁹ Tac. *Ann.* 1.79.3. The solemnity is notable: cf. Curt. 8.2.1.1 *male humanis ingenii natura consuluit, quod plerumque non futura, sed transacta perpendimus*.

³⁰ Tac. *Ann.* 1.79.3; Grant (n. 6) translates: 'indeed Tiber himself would scarcely be glad to flow less majestically, deprived of his associate tributaries'; 'majestically' is apt, but *nolle* and *prorsus* are stronger than 'would scarcely'. A.J. Church and W. Jackson Brodribb, *The Annals of Tacitus translated into English* (Chicago, 1900), ad loc. is better: 'Tiber himself would be altogether unwilling ... to flow with less glory'. C. Damon, *Tacitus Annals* (London, 2012) (quoted above) is very direct: 'Tiber himself does not want ...'.

³¹ See the seminal summary by A.J. Woodman and R.H. Martin (edd.), *The Annals of Tacitus Book 3* (Cambridge, 1996), 491–3. A sample would include: *Hist.* 5.9.1 *regnum ... Augustus auxit*; *Ann.* 12.26.1 *augetur et Agrippina cognomento Augustae* and 5.1.1 *Rubellio et Fufio consulibus, quorum utriusque Geminus cognomentum erat*.

³² Tac. *Ann.* 1.52.1 *Germanici gloriaangebatur [sc. Tiberius]*.

³³ Tac. *Ann.* 2.84.1 *non temperauerit quin iactaret*. In Tacitus' book, such bragging is despicable: cf. e.g. *Ann.* 4.11.1, 6.25.3, 15.4.1; *Hist.* 3.39.1.

³⁴ Tac. *Ann.* 2.84.1 *nam cuncta, etiam fortuita, ad gloriam uertebat [sc. Tiberius]*.

³⁵ Tac. *Ann.* 2.88.1 *qua gloria aequabat se Tiberius priscis imperatoribus*; the plural seems rhetorical: Tiberius is aligning himself with the legendary C. Fabricius Luscinus (cos. 282 B.C.); Livy, *Per.* 13; Claudius Quadrigarius, *FRHist* F 41; Luscinus was a man of *magna gloria*: Gell. *NA* 4.8.9.

³⁶ Tac. *Ann.* 3.47.4 *se non tam uacuum gloria praedicabat; praedicabat* is telling: cf. Cic. *Arch.* 26 on philosophers denigrating pride and glory but still putting their name on the book's cover (*in eo ipso in quo praedicationem ... despiciunt, praedicari de se ac se nominari uolunt*); similarly, *Off.* 1.137 *deforme etiam est de se ipsum praedicare ...*; this, Cicero adds, is the behaviour of a latter-day Miles gloriosus.

³⁷ Tac. *Ann.* 3.54.6 *cum gloriam eius rei adepti sunt, simulates ... mihi reliquunt*.

those who had suffered in a fire on the Caelian hill was again turned into a matter of augmenting his *gloria*.³⁸

When doubling as an alter ego, it therefore seems logical that Tacitus lets the Tiber oppose the suggestion to diminish his 'gloria'.

LINKING BEGINNING AND END

Early in Book 1, during the so-called accession debate in the Senate, Asinius Gallus provocatively took Tiberius at his word, asking which part of the *res publica* he wanted to govern, since he himself insisted that he was unequal to govern it all. The question caused acute embarrassment, since no one was expected to take Tiberius' *recusatio* quite as literally as that.³⁹ At the end of Book 1, Tacitus returns to this theme, once again with Tiberius and Asinius Gallus at loggerheads. And once again, the outcome is affirmation of the status quo, the episode given closure with a wonderfully ambiguous and resigned conclusion: the Senate agreeing to the motion of *nil mutandum* ('nothing should be changed'). On this thematic note the book is then brought to an end, the appointment of new governors being shown to lead to no changes (1.80), and the 'changes' of electoral procedure (1.81) being a sham, the image of seeming liberty being a cover up for the ever more loathsome tyranny.

It is within this thematic web, which with masterly craft unites a series of seemingly disparate episodes, that Tacitus gives a cameo role to Asinius Gallus, the son of the famously outspoken historian Asinius Pollio.⁴⁰ Gallus had like Tacitus been a consul, governor of Asia⁴¹ and, of course, a *quindecimvir*, the ancient priestly college of which Tacitus some seven decades later became a member.⁴² By the time of Tiberius' accession, Asinius Gallus was one of the senior members of the college, one of the survivors of those who more than thirty years before had presided at the legendary *ludi saeculares* in 17 B.C. However, in spite of, or indeed because of,⁴³ his standing and merits, in the end this eminent consular became yet another victim of

³⁸ Tac. *Ann.* 6.45.1 *ad gloriam uertit [sc. Tiberius]*.

³⁹ Tac. *Ann.* 1.12.2–4; the episode's implications remain hotly contested, views ranging from Syme (n. 4), 427–8 and M. Griffin, 'Tacitus, Tiberius and the Principate', in I. Malkin and Z.W. Rubinsohn (edd.), *Leaders & Masses in the Roman World. Studies in Honor of Zvi Yavetz* (Leiden, 1995), 33–58 (with whom I side) to A.J. Woodman, 'Tacitus on Tiberius' accession', *Tacitus Reviewed* (Oxford, 1998), 40–69 (with ample bibliography); it is widely agreed, however, that Tiberius at the occasion ineptly mishandled the issue, when asking for a more 'constitutional' legitimization of his (unacknowledged and non-negotiable) powerbase. Looking back with a century or two of imperial experience, the 'insincerity' verdict of Tacitus, Suetonius and Dio seems well founded.

⁴⁰ Dio 57.2.5 stresses that Gallus had inherited the 'blunt speech' (παρρησία) of his father; cf. Tac. *Ann.* 1.12.4 *patris ferociam* with Mallan (n. 27), ad loc. and the introduction to Pollio in *FRHist*, vol. I (Oxford, 2013), 430–45.

⁴¹ G. Herbert-Brown, 'C. Asinius Gallus, Ti. Claudius Nero and a posthumous Agrippa in Ephesus (ILS 8897)', *Syllecta Classica* 15 (2004), 131–51 looks convincingly at evidence predating Tiberius' accession, which illustrates Gallus' loyalty to the 'House' of Agrippa and his deep-seated conflict with Tiberius.

⁴² For Asinius Gallus as a *quindecimvir*, see n. 5 above; Tacitus the same: *Ann.* 11.11.1.

⁴³ In the Senate of his day, L. Arruntius, M. Valerius Messala Messalinus and perhaps also C. Sentius Saturninus were further survivors from that prestigious group: Syme (n. 14 [1986]), 47–9. In talks of Augustus (as reported by Tac. *Ann.* 1.13.2), Asinius Gallus had along with Arruntius been mentioned as *capax imperii* (probably resulting in Tiberius' deadly hostility towards both).

the tyrant's relentless cruelty.⁴⁴ By circumventing Tiberius' attempt at a political and religious 'cover up' (*diuina humanaque obtegens*) and instead allowing us to hear from Tiber himself, what 'he' had wanted to prophecy, Tacitus the *quindecimuir* here seems to stand up for his silenced Tiberian 'colleague'.

Not that Tacitus was unaware of the 'scientific' explanation of such natural phenomena. As he elsewhere observes: in times of peace, such fluctuations of a river were 'attributed to chance and natural causes'; but in times of turmoil 'it was called "fate" and "the anger of the gods"'.⁴⁵ For Tacitus, however, Tiberius' intervention is rooted in his desire to usurp the position as 'the sole arbiter' in religious matters.⁴⁶ What for centuries had been the Senate's competence, he here, with one strike, annuls.⁴⁷ To be sure, the cause of the flooding may well have been 'natural' and the suggestion of a 'scientific' approach well founded. But, as Tacitus puts it, when describing Tiberius' unconstitutional meddling with the judiciary in the same chapters, 'although in some cases it promoted truth, it ruined freedom'.⁴⁸

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⁴⁴ Like Tiberius' one-time wife Julia (J. Linderski, 'Julia at Rhegium', *ZPE* 72 [1988], 181–200) and his grandson Drusus (Tac. *Ann.* 6.23.2), Asinius Gallus was apparently starved to death: *Ann.* 6.23.1; for Gallus' *damnatio* and post-Tiberian rehabilitation, see Flower (n. 28), 143–8.

⁴⁵ *quod in pace fors seu natura, tunc fatum et ira deum uocabatur [dei MSS: deum Nipperdey]*, Tac. *Hist.* 4.26.2.

⁴⁶ 'sole arbiter': Shannon-Henderson (n. 7), 27.

⁴⁷ The Senate ordering the *decemuires*, later *quindecimuires*, to consult the Sibyls: Livy 5.13.4 (*ex senatus consulto*), 7.27.1 (*senatum imperare*); similarly 21.62.6 and 22.9.7; 36.37.4 (*ex senatus consulto*), 41.21.10 (*senatus decreuit*); similarly, Dio 39.15.3–16.1, 39.59.3.

⁴⁸ *set dum ueritati consulitur, libertas corrumpatur*, *Ann.* 1.75.1.