

LITERARY AUGURY AT THE END OF *ANNALS* XIII

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BOOK XIII of Tacitus' *Annals* opens with the accession of Nero and covers the years A.D. 54–58, or almost the entire first *quinquennium*. With the opening of Book XIV, this five-year period of tranquillity and good government is drawing to a close, and Tacitus wastes no time in characterizing the sudden outbreak of Nero's savagery: *GAIO VIPS(T)ANO (C.) FONTEIO consulibus diu meditatatum scelus non ultra Nero distulit* (14.1.1). The crime alluded to is, of course, the murder of Agrippina, which takes place that year (14.8) and which ushers in a marked deterioration in Nero's behavior (14.13.2). Just prior to this headlong plunge into depravity, Book XIII concluded with two curious events which at first glance have no connection with what precedes or follows: a fire at Colonia Agrippinensis and the death and subsequent resurgence of the *figus Ruminalis*.¹ The very coincidence of the conclusion of a book and the conclusion of a consular year, nowhere else to be found in the later books of the *Annals*, draws attention to these events in such a way as to suggest that they are somehow related to the course of history that follows.² Tacitus, as literary augur, invites the reader to interpret the portentous significance of both the fire on the Rhine frontier and the withering and rebirth of the Ruminalis, and, in so doing, he reveals the depraved nature of Nero's principate in the years ahead.

In referring to Colonia Agrippinensis simply as "the recently founded colony" (*conditae nuper coloniae*, 13.57.3), Tacitus assumes that the reader will recall that the colony had been named in honor of the empress (12.27.1). Moreover, once the reader makes the connection between the colony and empress, the next step in the deductive process logically

¹Note R. Syme's harsh judgment on the end of Book XIII (*Tacitus* [Oxford 1958] 2.745): "Concluding Book XIII with a series of events on the Rhine frontier, 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)."

²F. G. Moore, "Annalistic Method as Related to the Book Divisions in Tacitus," *TAPA* 54 (1923) 9, notes the importance of the ends of books in the second half of the *Annals*, but he does not include the end of Book XIII as being "dramatic or impressive." C. Segal, "Tacitus and Poetic History: The End of Annals XIII," *Ramus* 2 (1973) 107–126, regards Tacitus' statement that the more polluted the clothes were which the Germans cast on the fire, the more the fire was extinguished (13.57.3) as a reference to the future widespread pollution at Rome in Book XIV, and he sees a contrast between this "natural fire" on the Rhine and the "fires of lust" that abound in Book XIV. He interprets the rebirth of the Ruminalis as ironic, in view of the fact that it occurs just before the worst years of Nero's principate.

follows: the fact that the fire occurs near the colony named after Agrippina might somehow be related to her own destruction.³ And so it proves to be. Tacitus later describes Agrippina's death from the blows delivered by a trierarch (14.8.5): *circumsistunt lectum percussores et prior trierarchus fusti eius adffixit*. This calls up in the mind of the reader the earlier picture of the Ubii's attempt to quell the flames with blows of clubs and other instruments (13.57.3): *dein resistentibus flammis propius suggesti ictu fustium aliisque verberibus ut feras absterrebant*. Accordingly, the fire at the colony named after Agrippina and the accompanying scene of the beating of the fire with clubs serve as a portent of Agrippina's own imminent doom.⁴

Immediately following the account of the fire, Tacitus closes Book XIII with a brief reference to the withering and subsequent resurgence of the *ficus Ruminalis*, which, according to legend, had covered and protected Romulus and Remus in their infancy.⁵ Since this tree was closely associated with the founding of Rome, its temporary state of decay was regarded as an ominous portent until new shoots sprouted forth. The rebirth of the Ruminalis at that very point at which Nero's principate begins to degenerate has perplexed scholars. Two explanations have been offered: first, that Tacitus here displays his skepticism towards Roman religion;⁶ second, that the regeneration of the Ruminalis was intended to be "ironic."⁷ A third, and I believe more convincing, explanation requires the reader to investigate once again Tacitus' employment of literary augury. Just as the fire on the Rhine portends the murder of Agrippina, the temporary withering of the Ruminalis portends the disastrous events of the next ten years, and its subsequent rebirth the accession of Vespasian.⁸

³So suggested by E. Koestermann *ad loc.*, *Cornelius Tacitus Annalen*, III (Heidelberg 1967) 347.

⁴Although *fustis* is the normal word for "cudgel," found in Plautus, Cicero, Sallust, Horace, Velleius, and Juvenal, there are only two other occurrences of *fustis* in the *Annals* (3.21.1; 14.44.4). Both passages refer to the ancient Roman practice of flogging to death with a *fustis* every tenth man, drawn by lot, in a routed Roman army.

⁵On the connection between the Ruminalis tree and the births of Romulus and Remus, cf. also Livy 1.4.5; Pliny *NH* 15.20.77; Plut. *Rom.* 4.1; Varro *Ling.* 5.54.

⁶P. Fabia "L'Irréligion de Tacite," *Journal des Savants* n.s. 12 (1914) 250–265, interpreted the number of false prodigies in the later books of the *Annals* as an indication of Tacitus' skepticism towards Roman religion or at least of his belief that the gods fail to intervene in human affairs, a belief expressed at *Ann.* 16.33.1: *aequitate deum erga bona malaque documenta*.

⁷So Segal (above, n. 2) 109–115. See also his bibliographical references (124, n. 20) on the general problem of Tacitus' attitude towards Roman religion, especially towards the meaning of omens and portents. For a catalogue of the omens, portents, and prodigies in Tacitus, see F. B. Krauss, *An Interpretation of the Omens, Portents, and Prodigies Recorded by Livy, Tacitus, and Suetonius* (Diss. Pennsylvania 1930).

⁸In a recent note, "The Prodigy of the Fig-Tree: Tacitus' *Annales* 13.58," *RSC* 25 (1977) 183–186, S. K. Dickison and M. Plympton suggest that the metaphors of birth,

Richmond Lattimore has shown that our chief literary sources for the Julio-Claudian and Flavian periods—Tacitus, Suetonius, and Dio—indicate that Vespasian “was led by circumstances to accept and develop (whatever may have been his private views on the matter) something resembling a legend.”⁹ Josephus reinforces this view, especially in recording his own prediction that Vespasian would become emperor (*B* 3.399–408).

As far as Tacitus is concerned, we may turn to *Hist.* 2.78.2, where Mucianus has just delivered his famous speech urging Vespasian to declare himself emperor. Tacitus reports that after hearing this speech, Vespasian reflected on those events in his life which showed that he had been destined to become emperor: *recursabant animo vetera omina: cupressus arbor in agris eius conspicua altitudine repente prociderat ac postera die eodem vestigio resurgens procera et latior virebat*. Since the story of the sudden resurgence of the cypress tree is also reported by Suetonius (*Vesp.* 5.4) and by Dio (66.1), it must have been firmly established in the popular historical tradition.¹⁰ Moreover, Suetonius (*Dom.* 15) reports that shortly before Domitian’s assassination, the same cypress tree which had earlier portended Vespasian’s future success suddenly withered. Hence the great significance of the cypress tree for the Flavians. The rebirth of the cypress tree in Vespasian’s youth appears all the more miraculous when we read in Festus (s.v. *Cupressi*, p. 56 Lindsay) that cypress trees were placed in the houses of those who had died because this tree, when cut down, is incapable of rejuvenation.¹¹

The particular association of the cypress tree with Vespasian can be properly understood if we turn to Pliny *NH* 16.84.236:

nurturing, and death associated with the *figus Ruminalis* portend the death of Agrippina by her own son, and that the portents mentioned at *Ann.* 14.12.3–5 echo the themes of birth and death raised at 13.58 and serve to bring the matricide episode to a close.

⁹“Portents and Prophecies in Connection with the Emperor Vespasian,” *CJ* 29 (1934) 441.

¹⁰In this context, note also the story reported by Suetonius (*Vesp.* 5.2) that an old oak tree on the suburban estate of the Flavii shot forth a huge branch at Vespasian’s birth. After Vespasian’s father Sabinus had been further encouraged by an inspection of entrails, he announced to his mother that a grandson had been born to her who would be a Caesar. The consultation of the soothsayers and the announcement of Vespasian’s future destiny as Roman emperor parallel the recognition and public announcement of the divine origin of an Egyptian pharaoh at his birth. Moreover, commenting on Suetonius’ account of the vision appearing before Vespasian in the temple of Serapis at Alexandria (*Vesp.* 7.1), A. Henrichs, “Vespasian’s Visit to Alexandria,” *ZPE* 3 (1968) 61–65, interprets the articles offered by Basilides—boughs, garlands, and loaves of bread (*verbenas coronasque et panificia*)—as “symbols of kingship” (p. 62).

¹¹F. Cumont, *Recherches sur le Symbolisme Funéraire des Romains*, Bibliothèque Archéologique et Historique 35 (1942) 219–220, points out that coniferous trees, especially the pine, cypress, and laurel, symbolized in Roman funerary art immortality and rebirth to a new life, since these trees remain verdant when nature is dying.

Verum altera lotos in Volcanali quod Romulus constituit ex victoria de decumis, aequaeva urbi intellegitur, ut auctor est Masurius. radices eius in forum usque Caesaris per stationes municipiorum penetrant. fuit cum ea cupressus aequalis circa suprema Neronis principis prolapsa atque neglecta.

Two points in this passage are of special concern. First, both the lotus tree and the cypress tree were as old as the founding of the city. Second, the spreading of the roots of the lotus tree across the municipal offices to the Forum of Caesar symbolizes the course of Roman history from the founding of the city up to the close of Nero's principate, when the cypress tree fell down and was left neglected. In the tradition which recorded the portent of Vespasian's accession at the miraculous resurgence of a fallen cypress, we thus see the motif for a "second founding" of the city itself at Vespasian's accession.

A similar development can be traced with regard to the symbolic importance of the fig tree. In referring to the bronze tablet in the *comitium* which celebrated the protection of Romulus and Remus by the Ruminalis, Pliny (*NH* 15.20.77) adds: *tamquam comitium sponte transisset Atto Navio augurante*. The miraculous story of Naevius' cutting a whetstone in half with a razor is reported by Livy (1.36), and Festus (s.v. *Navia*, pp. 169–170 Lindsay) tells of a fig tree in the *comitium* named after Naevius. Much of the entry in Festus is missing, but K. O. Müller's restoration of the last few lines points to the important relationship between the *Navia ficus* and *libertas*: (. . . *quamdiu illa ficus*) *viveret, libertatem populi Romani incolumem mansuram*.¹² Similarly, the withering of the *ficus Ruminalis* near the end of Nero's first *quinquennium* portends the loss of *libertas* during the remaining years of his principate.

We might add that Pliny (*NH* 16.57.132–133) was generally interested in the spontaneous resurrection of fallen trees: *est in exemplis et sine tempestate ullave causa alia quam prodigii cecidisse multas ac sua sponte resurrexisse*. As examples he lists an elm tree during the Cimbrian Wars, a willow at Philippi, a white poplar in the shrine of the Muses at Stagira, and a plane tree at Antandros—*omnia fausti ominis*. At *NH* 17.38.243 he mentions that before the civil war between Pompey and Caesar a tree (the genus is unspecified) in the territory of Cumae sank into the ground leaving a few branches protruding; a statement was found in the Sibylline Books that this portended a slaughter of human beings, and that the nearer to the city the portent had occurred, the greater the slaughter would be.

Putting these precedents in the context of Vespasianic lore, we ought

¹²In the 1978 Jerome Lectures, soon to be published by the University of Michigan Press, M. Torelli notes the important connection between *libertas* and the motif of the *ficus Ruminalis* in Trajan's principate.

to mention, as both W. Mannhardt and K. Scott did, that the fateful significance of the cypress tree for the Flavians bears an uncanny resemblance to the fateful significance of the laurel tree for the Julio-Claudians.¹³ Pliny (*NH* 15.40.136–137) tells the story that on Livia's betrothal to Augustus an eagle flying overhead dropped into her lap a hen of remarkable whiteness, and that in its mouth was a laurel branch full of berries. The augurs ordered that the bird and any chickens it produced should be preserved, and that the branch should be planted in the ground and guarded with religious care. This was done at the country mansion of the Caesars on the banks of the Tiber about nine miles out of Rome on the Via Flaminia, and the house was called "*Ad gallinas*." Suetonius relates the story in the opening chapter of his life of Galba and adds that in Nero's last year the whole forest withered, root and branch, and that the chickens died (*ergo novissimo Neronis anno et silva omnis exaruit radicitus, et quidquid ibi gallinarum erat interiiit*).¹⁴

To return to the *figus Ruminalis* at *Ann.* 13.58, over fifty years ago W. Kroll speculated that the death and rebirth of the Ruminalis might constitute an allusion to the end of the Julian house and the rise of the Flavians, but he provided no evidence to support this view.¹⁵ Even earlier, C. Boetticher suggested that the portent only made sense if the withering of the tree was connected with the death of Nero.¹⁶ So I contend. When Tacitus says that the withering of the tree was regarded as a prodigy until it gave forth new branches, he is not discounting the portentous significance of the event; rather, he is discrediting those who could not properly interpret the rebirth of the tree.¹⁷ Among this latter category are scholars who simply interpret the rebirth of the Ruminalis as "ironic." The temporary drying up of the primordial fig tree portends the disastrous events of the years 59–69, including the civil war, and its

¹³W. Mannhardt, *Antike Wald- und Feldkulte* (Berlin 1877) 24; K. Scott, *The Imperial Cult of the Flavians* (Stuttgart-Berlin 1936) 5, n. 1. In his article "Cypresse," *RE* IV.2 (1901) 1909–1938, Olck also noted the importance of the cypress tree for the destiny of the Flavians (col. 1915).

¹⁴In the Ptolemaic "Prophecy of the Potter," the shooting forth of new foliage on the acanthus shrub heralds the appearance of a new king who will restore life and order to a ravaged world. See L. Koenen, "Bemerkungen zum Text des Töpferorakels und zu dem Akaziensymbol," *ZPE* 13 (1974) 313–319.

¹⁵"Zur Historiographie: Tacitus," *Studien zum Verständnis der Römischen Literatur* (Stuttgart 1924) 373. Similarly, though in less specific terms, P. Wuilleumier at *Ann.* 13.58 (*Annales* Livre XIII [Paris 1964] 104) views the rebirth of the Ruminalis as symbolic of the tragic drama that follows, and of the ultimate perennial quality of Rome.

¹⁶*Der Baumkultus der Hellenen* (Berlin 1856) 130.

¹⁷Cf. *Ann.* 6.22.3 for a similar comment on those who discredit astrology because of their own unskilful interpretation.

rebirth the accession of Vespasian and the restoration of order—a second founding of Rome.¹⁸

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¹⁸As L. Koenen has noted (“Eine Berechnung der Regierungsjahre des Augustus vom Tode Caesars. Zur Datierung der Gesprächssituation von Tacitus’ *Dialogus* (17,3),” *ZPE* 13 [1974] 231–234), at *Dial.* 17.3 Tacitus heralds the new age inaugurated by Vespasian’s accession. Moreover, the accession of each emperor was conventionally interpreted as the beginning of a *beatissimum saeculum*. Cf. Tacitus’ remarks on Nerva and Trajan at *Agr.* 3.1.