

BELLARIA CI



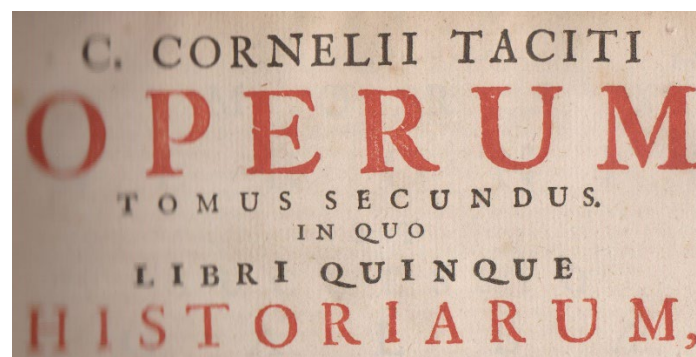
Modern statue outside the Austrian parliament building

Publius Cornelius Tacitus (c. AD 56-c. 120)

HISTORIES (i)

Introduction

Romans seem to have worked on the principle that, if you wish to write history, you had better first try to make it via a political career. About the age of 25, Tacitus became a 'quaestor of Augustus', working closely with the emperor (i.e. Vespasian) himself; at 29 he became tribune, at 32 (under Domitian) praetor and a member of a college of priests, and at 41 (in AD 97) consul under Nerva. He probably began writing soon after that, and in AD 112 was governor of Asia for a year. So he knew all too well the world that he was talking about.



His *Annals* covered the period from the death of Augustus in AD 14 to the suicide of Nero in AD 68 in 18 books, of which only 1 to 6 and 11 to 16 survive (and some of these only in parts). His *Histories*, probably in 12 books, began with the post-Neronian 'Year of the Four Emperors' (AD 69) and ended with Domitian, but only books 1 to 5 survive, covering that famous year. It is this period, when Tacitus was about 14 years old, from which the following extracts derive.

Nero had committed suicide on June 9th AD 68, at which point Servius Galba (governor of Spain) became emperor as a result of a massive bribe to the Praetorian Guard (not paid) and the assassination of various rivals. AD 69 saw Galba, Otho, Vitellius and finally Vespasian, the first of the line of Flavian emperors, all competing for the throne.

My job is to write a balanced history



Galba

1.1 My work begins when Servius Galba was once more consul [he had been consul in AD 33], with Titus Vinius as his colleague [AD 69]. Many authors have written of the previous eight hundred and twenty-two years since the founding of the city, and with equal eloquence and freedom of the Roman Republic: but after the battle of Actium [31 BC], when peace demanded all power be conferred on one man, writers of great distinction vanished. At the same time, truth was impaired in a host of ways, initially because the people treated politics as outside their concern, later out of a desire to flatter, or conversely to show their dislike of, their rulers. So that, between the subservient and the hostile, the needs of posterity were ignored.

1.1 *initium mihi operis Seruius Galba iterum Titus Vinius consules erunt. nam post conditam urbem octingentos et uiginti prioris aevi annos multi auctores rettulerunt, dum res populi Romani memorabantur pari eloquentia ac libertate: postquam bellatum apud Actium atque omnem potentiam ad unum conferri pacis interfuit, magna illa ingenia cessere; simul ueritas pluribus modis infracta, primum inscitia rei publicae ut alienae, mox libidine adsentandi aut rursus odio aduersus dominantis: ita neutris cura posteritatis inter infensos uel obnoxios.*

My career

1.1 For people quickly lose interest in writers who look to win favour, while they readily give a hearing to detraction and envy, flattery being charged with a shameful display of servility, while malice grants a false show of liberty. As for myself, I received neither kindness nor injury from Galba, Otho, or Vitellius. I cannot deny that my career was initiated by Vespasian, advanced by Titus, and prolonged by Domitian: but those who are faithful to the truth must speak of none simply through affection or hatred. But should my life be long, I have reserved for my old

age the reign of the deified Nerva and Trajan's rule, fertile and less dangerous material, the rare blessing of a time when it is permitted to think what one wishes and say what one thinks.

1.1 sed ambitionem scriptoris facile auerseris, obtrectatio et liuor pronis auribus accipiuntur; quippe adulationi foedum crimen seruitutis, malignitati falsa species libertatis inest. mihi Galba Otho Vitellius nec beneficio nec iniuria cogniti. dignitatem nostram a Vespasiano inchoatam, a Tito auctam, a Domitiano longius prouectam non abnuerim: sed incorruptam fidem professis neque amore quisquam et sine odio dicendus est. quod si uita suppeditet, principatum diui Neruae et imperium Traiani, uberiolem securiolemque materiam, senectuti seposui, rara temporum felicitate ubi sentire quae uelis et quae sentias dicere licet.

Chaos across the empire



Sarmatians (a nomadic people from Iran, settling in Ukraine)

1.2 I enter on a period rich in events, made dreadful by violence, discordant with sedition, brutal even in peacetime. Four emperors died by the sword: there were three civil conflicts and even more foreign wars, both often taking place at the same time. There was success in the East, adversity in the West. Illyricum was turbulent, the Gallic provinces wavered, Britain was subdued then steadily relinquished [withdrawal of some legions], the Sarmatians and Suevi rose against us, the Dacians won fame by defeats suffered and inflicted, and even the Parthians were almost roused to warfare by the pretensions of one who claimed to be Nero. Moreover Italy was troubled by fresh disasters, or by those re-experienced after a lapse of ages.

1.2 opus adgredior opimum casibus, atrox proeliis, discors seditionibus, ipsa etiam pace saeuum. quattuor principes ferro interempti: trina bella ciuilia, plura externa ac plerumque permixta: prosperae in Oriente, aduersae in Occidente res: turbatum Illyricum, Galliae nutantes, perdomita Britannia et statim ommissa: coortae in nos Sarmatarum ac Sueborum gentes, nobilitatus cladibus mutuis Dacus, mota prope etiam Parthorum arma, falsi Neronis ludibrio. iam uero Italia nouis cladibus, uel post longam saeculorum seriem repetitis, adflicta.



Earthquake relief from Pompeii

1.2 Cities on the fertile shores of Campania were overwhelmed and buried, Rome was devastated by fire, her ancient shrines consumed, and the Capitol itself set alight by her citizens. The sacred rites were corrupted, with widespread adultery: the sea bore a host of exiles, the cliffs were foul with corpses.

There was greater savagery still in Rome: birth, wealth, the refusal or the performance of office, led to accusations of guilt, and virtue was the surest way to ruin. The rewards given to informers were as detestable as their crimes, some being granted priesthoods and consulships as their prize, while others as imperial agents or powerful at court worked everywhere to inspire hatred and terror. Slaves were corrupted to betray their masters, freedmen their patrons; and those who lacked enemies were destroyed by their friends.

1.2 *haustae aut obrutae urbes, fecundissima Campaniae ora; et urbs incendiis uastata, consumptis antiquissimis delubris, ipso Capitolio ciuium manibus incenso. pollutae caerimoniae, magna adulteria: plenum exiliis mare, infecti caedibus scopuli. atrocius in urbe saeuitum: nobilitas, opes, omissi gestique honores pro crimine et ob uirtutes certissimum exitium. nec minus praemia delatorum inuisa quam scelera, cum alii sacerdotia et consulatus ut spolia adepti, procurationes alii et interiorem potentiam, agerent uerterent cuncta odio et terrore. corrupti in dominos serui, in patronos liberti; et quibus deerat inimicus per amicos oppressi.*

[The Roman legions in Upper Germany were not happy with the choice of Galba and on the 1st January AD 69 refused the oath of allegiance; meanwhile legions in Lower Germany were being stirred to revolt by Vitellius, and the Roman armies in the East too were considering their options under Vespasian, whose ally on the Danube, Antonius Primus, immediately started to march on Rome.

Old, ill and detested, Galba decided to hand over the job to Piso, a young, noble descendant of Pompey and Crassus]

Part of Galba's speech to Piso

1.16 'If only the vast body of the Empire might stand firmly without a supreme head, it would be right for the republic to be reinstated by me: but necessity has long been such that I can make no better a gift to the Roman people, in my old age, than a fine successor, nor you of your youth more than a fine emperor. Under Tiberius, Caligula and Claudius, our position was a kind of family inheritance: now we initiate election to the role there will be a kind of freedom, and with the Julian and Claudian houses no more, whoever is best must be chosen for adoption.'

1.16 '*si immensum imperii corpus stare ac librari sine rectore posset, dignus eram a quo res publica inciperet: nunc eo necessitatis iam pridem uentum est ut nec mea senectus conferre plus populo Romano possit quam bonum successorem, nec tua plus iuuenta quam bonum principem. sub Tiberio et Gaio et Claudio unius familiae quasi hereditas fuimus: loco libertatis erit quod eligi coepimus; et finita Iuliorum Claudiorumque domo optimum quemque adoptio inueniet.*'



Nero and Agrippina and Vindex

1.16 'For to be conceived by and born of a noble house is mere chance, and of no greater significance than that, but the judgement shown in adoption is impartial and, if one would choose, consensus points the way. Keep Nero's example before your eyes, swollen as he was with his pride in the long line of Caesars. It was not Vindex [governor of Gaul], with a harmless province, nor I with my single legion that drove him from power, but his own savagery and extravagance; and before that there was no precedent for condemning an emperor to death.'

1.16 '*nam generari et nasci a principibus fortuitum, nec ultra aestimatur: adoptandi iudicium integrum et, si uelis eligere, consensu monstratur. sit ante oculos Nero quem longa Caesarum serie tumentem non Vindex cum inermi prouincia aut ego cum una legione, sed sua immanitas, sua luxuria ceruicibus publicis depulerunt; neque erat adhuc damnati principis exemplum.*'

1.16 'We who are raised by war and men's esteem will be subject to envy however worthy we might be. Nor should you fear a legion or two that are still in turmoil, given that the world has been shaken to its foundations. I did not come to the throne without risk, but on the news of your adoption I shall cease to seem an old man, the sole charge now made against me. The worst of men will always long for Nero; you and I must take care that the good do not wish for him too.'

1.16 *'nos bello et ab aestimantibus adsciti cum inuidia quamuis egregii erimus. ne tamen territus fueris si duae legiones in hoc concussi orbis motu nondum quiescunt: ne ipse quidem ad securas res accessi, et audita adoptione desinam uideri senex, quod nunc mihi unum obicitur. Nero a pessimo quoque semper desiderabitur: mihi ac tibi prouidendum est ne etiam a bonis desideretur.'*

[Otho, governor of Lusitania (Portugal), had supported Galba and hoped to be his heir]

Otho plots his move to power



Otho

1.21 Otho, in the meantime, who had nothing to gain from a state of calm, his plans all depending on chaos, was spurred on by many things, an extravagance that would have burdened an emperor, a lack of wealth that even a private citizen could scarcely tolerate, anger towards Galba, and envy of Piso. He conjured up fears that enhanced his greed: that he had wearied Nero, and could not again expect an honourable exile in Lusitania; that tyrants always hated and were suspicious of any man seen as a successor; and that this had already harmed him as regards the aged Galba, and would do him greater harm as regards young Piso, who was harsh by nature and embittered by long exile: an Otho could easily be killed.

1.21 *interea Othonem, cui compositis rebus nulla spes, omne in turbido consilium, multa simul extimulabant, luxuria etiam principi onerosa, inopia uix priuato toleranda, in Galbam ira, in Pisonem inuidia; fingebat et metum quo magis concupisceret: prae grauem se Neroni fuisse, nec Lusitaniam rursus et alterius exilii honorem expectandum. suspectum semper inuisumque dominans qui proximus destinaretur. nocuisse id sibi apud senem principem, magis nociturum apud iuuenem ingenio trucem et longo exilio efferatum: occidi Othonem posse.*

Now or never for Otho

1.21 Therefore he must be bold and act, while the emperor's authority was weak, and his successor's not yet deployed. The period of transition was ripe for great deeds, and a man must not delay when inaction is more ruinous than sheer risk. Death comes to all alike, but brings oblivion or glory in the eyes of posterity; and though the same end waits for the guilty and the innocent, the man of greater powers should win merit in dying.

1.21 *proinde agendum audendumque, dum Galbae auctoritas fluxa, Pisonis nondum coaluisset. opportunos magnis conatibus transitus rerum, nec cunctatione opus, ubi perniciosior sit quies quam temeritas. mortem omnibus ex natura aequalem obliuione apud posteros uel gloria distingui; ac si nocentem innocentemque idem exitus maneat, acrioris uiri esse merito perire.*

[Otho moved to bring on board those disaffected with Galba and greedy for power. On January 16 AD 69, Galba attended a sacrifice, together with Otho, who slipped away from it to join the conspirators. Chaos ensued, nobody knew exactly what was going on, crowds gathered and Galba decided to try take matters in hand himself.]

Galba achieves nothing

1.40 Galba, was driven to and fro by the varying impulse of the surging crowds who filled the courts and temples, contemplating the mournful prospect. Neither the citizens nor the masses uttered a cry, but their faces showed terror and they strained towards every sound. There was no noise, not even a subdued quiet, but such a silence as great fear and fury bring. Yet Otho was told the masses were being armed, and ordered his supporters to move quickly and head off the danger.

1.40 *agebatur huc illuc Galba uario turbae fluctuantis impulsu, completis undique basilicis ac templis, lugubri prospectu. neque populi aut plebis ulla uox, sed attoniti uultus et conuersae ad omnia aures; non tumultus, non quies, quale magni metus et magnae irae silentium est. Othoni tamen armari plebem nuntiabatur; ire praecipitis et occupare pericula iubet.*

Otho's men charge into the forum



Pacorus II (AD 78-110)



(Vologaes III (AD 110-147)

1.40 So the soldiers of Rome charged out as though to drive a Vologaesius [AD 51-78], or a Pacorus (78-110) from the ancient throne of the Parthian Arsacidae, not to kill their old defenceless emperor. They scattered the crowds, trampled senators, and burst, fiercely armed, at full gallop into the forum. Neither the sight of the Capitol, nor reverence for its towering temples, nor the thought of emperors past or to come deterred them from committing a crime that an imperial successor must punish, whoever he might be.

1.40 *igitur milites Romani, quasi Vologaesum aut Pacorum auito Arsacidarum solio depulsuri ac non imperatorem suum inermem et senem trucidare pergerent, disiecta plebe, proculcato senatu, truces armis, rapidi equis forum inrumpunt. nec illos Capitolii aspectus et imminentium templorum religio et priores et futuri principes terruere quo minus facerent scelus cuius ultor est quisquis successit.*

The populace flee, and Galba is murdered



Death of Galba

1.41 The standard-bearer of Galba's bodyguards (who was named Atilius Vergilio, they say), on seeing the armed men closing with them, tore Galba's insignia from the standard, and threw it to the ground. That signalled the evident enthusiasm of the military towards Otho, and the populace swiftly deserted the forum, those who hesitated facing drawn swords.

1.41 *uiso comminus armatorum agmine uexillarius comitatae Galbam cohortis (Atilium Vergilionem fuisse tradunt) dereptam Galbae imaginem solo adflixit: eo signo manifesta in Othonem omnium militum studia, desertum fuga populi forum, destricta aduersus dubitantis tela.*

1.41 Close to the Lacus Curtius, Galba was thrown from his chair by his terrified carriers, and rolled on the ground. His last words have been variously reported, according to whether he was hated or admired. Some say he begged to know what wrong he had done, and prayed for a few days longer in which to pay the soldiers' wages: many that he freely offered his throat to his murderers, telling them to strike

quickly if they thought it would benefit the state. His killers paid no attention to the words.

1.41 *iuxta Curtii lacum trepidatione ferentium Galba proiectus e sella ac prouolutus est. extremam eius uocem, ut cuique odium aut admiratio fuit, uarie prodidere. alii suppliciter interrogasse quid mali meruisset, paucos dies exoluendo donatiuo deprecatum: plures obtulisse ultro percussoribus iugulum: agerent ac ferirent, si ita e re publica uideretur. non interfuit occidentium quid diceret.*

Tacitus' famous judgement of Galba

1.49 ... Such was the end of Servius Galba, who had survived, blessed with good fortune, seventy-three years and five emperors, yet was happier under other's rule than his own. His family, noble of old, possessing great wealth, he was of modest ability, free from failings rather than possessing virtue. Neither indifferent to fame nor seeking it, he was not covetous of others' property, frugal with his own, lavish with the state's.

1.49 ... *hunc exitum habuit Seruius Galba, tribus et septuaginta annis quinque principes prospera fortuna emensus et alieno imperio felicior quam suo. uetus in familia nobilitas, magnae opes: ipsi medium ingenium, magis extra uitia quam cum uirtutibus. famae nec incuriosus nec uenditator; pecuniae alienae non adpetens, suae parcus, publicae auarus.*

1.49 Long-suffering and indulgent with friends and freedmen alike, when he found them honest, he was blind to a fault regarding their wrongdoings. But his noble birth, and the fear those times inspired, obscured the truth, so that what was really complacency, men called wisdom. While in his prime, he won praise for his military service in Germany. He ruled Africa with restraint, as proconsul, and already old, showed the same judgement in Nearer Spain. He seemed more than a private citizen even when he was one, and by all accounts capable of imperial office, had he never held it.

1.49 *amicorum libertorumque, ubi in bonos incidisset, sine reprehensione patiens, si mali forent, usque ad culpam ignarus. sed claritas natalium et metus temporum obtentui, ut, quod segnitia erat, sapientia uocaretur. dum uigebat aetas militari laude apud Germanas floruit. pro consule Africam moderate, iam senior citeriorem Hispaniam pari iustitia continuit, maior priuato uisus dum priuatus fuit, et omnium consensu capax imperii nisi imperasset.*

Otho is emperor, but Vitellius is now on the march to Rome



Vitellius

1.50 Fresh news regarding Vitellius now terrified a city alarmed both by the recent atrocities and fears concerning Otho's previous character, news which had been suppressed prior to Galba's death, such that it was thought only the army in Upper Germany had mutinied. Now the idea that these two, Otho and Vitellius, the worst of all men in their shamelessness, idleness and profligacy, had been chosen it seemed, as if by fate, to destroy the empire, prompted open grief not only among the senators and knights who were part and parcel of the state, but even among the common citizens...

1.50 trepidam urbem ac simul atrocitatem recentis sceleris, simul ueteres Othonis mores pauentem nouus insuper de Vitellio nuntius exterruit, ante caedem Galbae suppressus ut tantum superioris Germaniae exercitum descuisse crederetur. tum duos omnium mortalium impudicitia ignauia luxuria deterrimos uelut ad perdendum imperium fataliter electos non senatus modo et eques, quis aliqua pars et cura rei publicae, sed uulgus quoque palam maerere...

And what of Vespasian in the East?



Vespasian

1.50 Even when honest men contended for power their world had been turned upside down, yet the empire had survived when Julius Caesar was the victor, and likewise Augustus; the Republic might have survived if Pompey and Brutus had succeeded. Now must they go to the temples and pray for an Otho or a Vitellius? Prayers for either would be impious, desire for either would be execrable, where the only certainty regarding the contest was that, whoever won, things would be worse.

There were those who augured the coming of Vespasian and his armies of the East, and yet, though Vespasian was preferable to the others, they were horrified at the thought of further massacre and conflict. And Vespasian's reputation was then mixed; he alone was destined to be altered for the better by power, unlike all the emperors before him.

1.50 *prope euersum orbem etiam cum de principatu inter bonos certaretur, sed mansisse G. Iulio, mansisse Caesare Augusto uictore imperium; mansuram fuisse sub Pompeio Brutoque rem publicam: nunc pro Othone an pro Vitellio in templa ituros? utrasque impias preces, utraque detestanda uota inter duos, quorum bello solum id scires, deteriores fore qui uicisset.*

erant qui Vespasianum et arma Orientis augurarentur, et ut potior utroque Vespasianus, ita bellum aliud atque alias cladis horrebant. et ambigua de Vespasiano fama, solusque omnium ante se principum in melius mutatus est.

Next week: Otho commits a 'noble' suicide as Vitellius' army approaches; Vitellius is defeated by the Vespasianic forces.