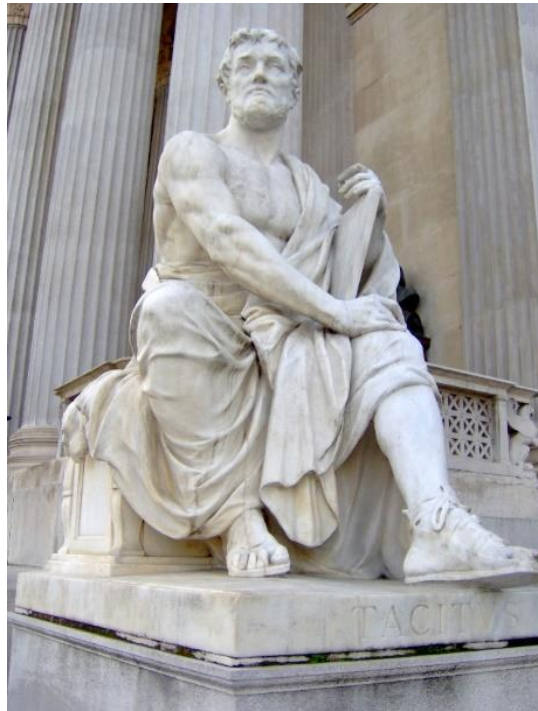


## *BELLARIA CII*



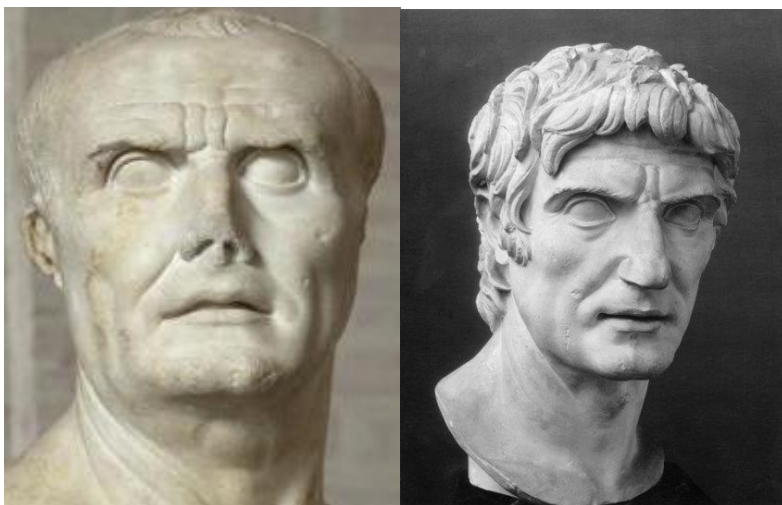
Modern statue outside the Austrian parliament building

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

### *HISTORIES (ii)*

#### Introduction

Tacitus reflects on man's desire for power

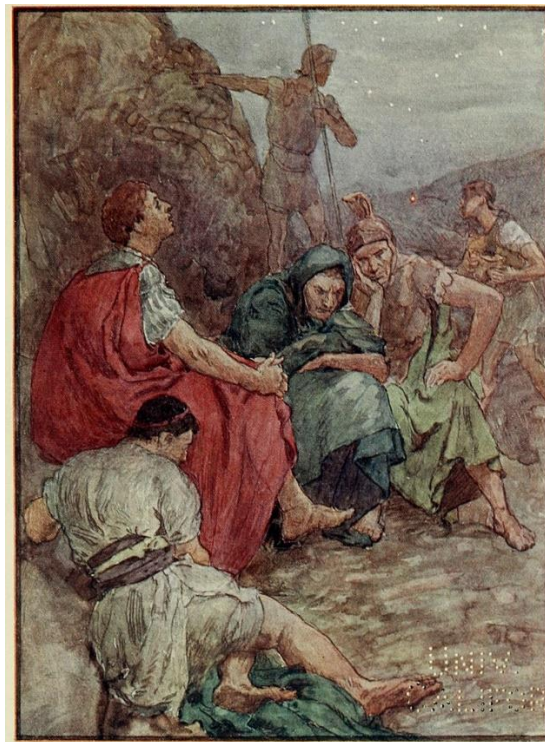


*Marius* (d. 86 BC)

*Sulla* (d. 78 BC)

2.38 The old desire for power, innate in humankind, flared with imperial greatness and then erupted. When means were modest, concord was easy to maintain, but once the known world was subjugated, rival kings and states diminished, and wealth freely coveted, then the first conflicts arose between patrician and plebeian [*optimates vs populares*, c. 146 BC]. Now it was the tribunes who caused trouble, now the consuls became too strong, and there was a foretaste of civil war in the forum and city. Later Marius, of humblest plebeian birth, and Sulla, the cruellest of nobles, turned liberty, conquered by force, to tyranny.

2.38 *uetus ac iam pridem insita mortalibus potentiae cupido cum imperii magnitudine adoleuit erupitque; nam rebus modicis aequalitas facile habebatur. sed ubi subacto orbe et aemulis urbibus regibusue excisis, securas opes concupiscere uacuum fuit, prima inter patres plebemque certamina exarsere. modo turbulenti tribuni, modo consules praeualidi, et in urbe ac foro temptamenta ciuiliu bellorum; mox e plebe infima C. Marius et nobilium saeuissimus L. Sulla uictam armis libertatem in dominationem uerterunt.*



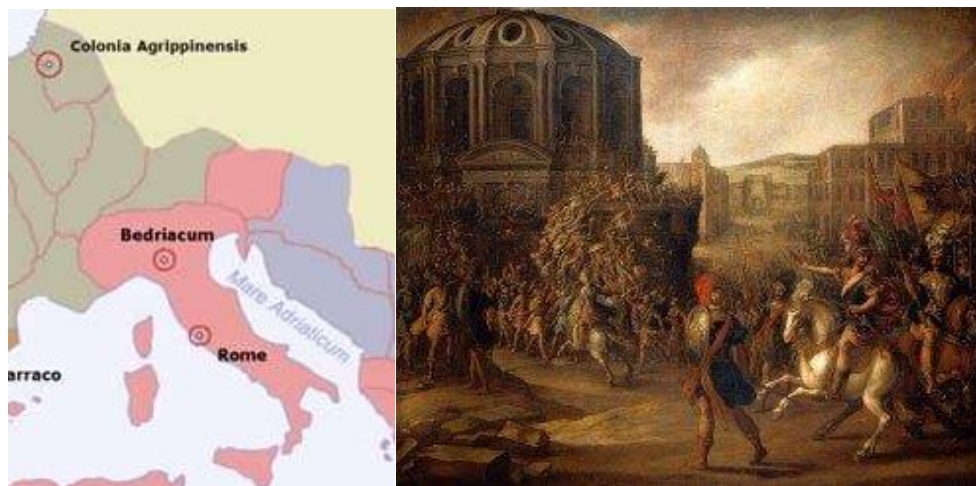
After Philippi [42 BC]: Cassius is dead, Brutus prepares for suicide

2.38 Pompey followed, stealthier but no better than they, and from then on the only aim was power. Legions of civilians did not abandon their weapons after Pharsalia [defeat of Pompey, 48 BC] and Philippi; nor were the armies of Vitellius and Otho likely to choose peace of their own accord. The same divine anger, the same human madness, the same roots of crime drove them to conflict. That these wars were each ended at a single blow, as it were, was simply due to the ineffectuality of leaders.

But my thoughts on the character of ancient times and modern has led me far afield, and now I come to things in their correct order.

*2.38 post quos Cn. Pompeius occultior non melior, et numquam postea nisi de principatu quaesitum. non discessere ab armis in Pharsalia ac Philippis ciuium legiones, nedum Othonis ac Vitellii exercitus sponte posituri bellum fuerint: eadem illos deum ira, eadem hominum rabies, eaedem scelerum causae in discordiam egere. quod singulis uelut ictibus transacta sunt bella, ignauia principum factum est. sed me ueterum nouorumque morum reputatio longius tulit: nunc ad rerum ordinem uenio.*

[Vitellius' army, marching down from Germany, meets Otho's troops at Bedriacum in north Italy and defeats them (April 14 AD 69). On hearing the news, Otho decides not to fight on.]



Battle of Bedriacum

### Otho's last thoughts to his men

*2.47* Otho himself was opposed to such thoughts of battle and said: 'I think it too great a price to pay for my survival to expose such spirits as yours, such courage as yours, to further danger. My death will be the finer the greater the hope, if only life had been my choice, that you have offered. We know each other well, Fortune and I. Do not count mere length of time: it is hard to control the success one cannot long rely on. Vitellius began the conflict, he began our contest in arms for power: but we shall not so contend again, for I shall set the example; let posterity judge Otho by this. Let Vitellius delight in brother, wife and heirs: I ask for neither vengeance nor solace. Others may rule the empire for longer, none shall relinquish it more bravely.'

2.47 *ipse auersus a consiliis belli 'hunc' inquit 'animum, hanc uirtutem uestram ultra periculis obicere nimis grande uitae meae pretium puto. quanto plus spei ostenditis, si uiuere placeret, tanto pulchrior mors erit. experti in uicem sumus ego ac fortuna. nec tempus conputaueritis: difficilius est temperare felicitati qua te non putes diu usurum. ciuile bellum a Vitellio coepit, et ut de principatu certaremus armis initium illic fuit: ne plus quam semel certemus penes me exemplum erit; hinc Othonem posteritas aestimet. fruetur Vitellius fratre, coniuge, liberis: mihi non ultione neque solaciis opus est. alii diutius imperium tenuerint, nemo tam fortiter reliquerit.'*



Not quite his expected *victoria*

2.47 'Should I again let so great a portion of Rome's youth, so many fine troops, be massacred and lost to the state? I cherish the thought that you are ready to die for me, but you must live. Let us no longer linger, I speaking of your survival, you of my decision. It is cowardly to talk at length of death. Let the strongest proof of my determination be that I make complaint of none; it is for him who chooses to live to find fault with gods or men.'

2.47 *'an ego tantum Romanae pubis, tot egregios exercitus sterni rursus et rei publicae eripi patiar? eat hic mecum animus, tamquam perituri pro me fueritis, set este superstites. nec diu moremur, ego incolumitatem uestram, uos constantiam meam. plura de extremis loqui pars ignauiae est. praecipuum destinationis meae documentum habete quod de nemine queror; nam incusare deos uel homines eius est qui uiuere uelit.'*

[On April 19 Vitellius is installed as emperor in Rome. But in early September Vespasian's man Antonius Primus invades Italy, and he and other pro-Vespasian

generals take on Vitellius' armies. Seeing that the game is up, Vitellius attempt to abdicate but is told to fight on (December 18). On December the 20th Antonius Primus enters Rome, where Vitellius' men make their final stand. But this is festival time—the Saturnalia—and the crowds are not going to be put off their fun.]

The crowds urge the soldiers on, as if it is a gladiator fight



Gladiators at a banquet (Lanfranco)

**3.83** The populace looked on as spectators to the conflict, as if at the fights in the gladiatorial ring, cheering on each party in turn with shouts and applause. If one side retreated, hiding or taking refuge in shops and private houses, the crowd demanded they be dragged out and killed: gaining for them a greater share of the plunder, since the soldiers were deep in blood and slaughter while the spoils were left to the mob.

**3.83** *aderat pugnantibus spectator populus, utque in ludicro certamine, hos, rursus illos clamore et plausu fouebat. quotiens pars altera inclinasset, abditos in tabernis aut si quam in domum perfugerant, erui iugularique expostulantes parte maiore praedae potiebantur: nam milite ad sanguinem et caedis obuerso spolia in uulgus cedebant.*



The bloodshed simply adds to the fun



Sulla fights his way into Rome

3.83 Foul and hideous acts were witnessed throughout the city: on one side were conflict and wounds, on the other bath-houses and taverns; beside the blood and corpses mingled whores and their clients alike; all the debauchery of the most dissolute peacetime, all the crimes of a most savage conquest; such that it seemed the city was at once mad with rage and lasciviousness.

True, armed men had fought their way through the city before this, twice when Lucius Sulla, and once when Cinna prevailed, with no less savagery: but now with an inhuman indifference, never interrupting their pleasure for an instant: as if it were a fresh entertainment added to some festival, exulting, joyful, supporting neither side, revelling in civil disaster.

3.83 *saeua ac deformis urbe tota facies: alibi proelia et uulnera, alibi balineae popinaeque; simul cruor et strues corporum, iuxta scorta et scortis similes; quantum in luxurioso otio libidinum, quidquid in acerbissima captiuitate scelerum, prorsus ut eandem ciuitatem et furere crederes et lasciuire.*

*confluxerant et ante armati exercitus in urbe, bis Lucio Sulla, semel Cinna uictoribus, nec tunc minus crudelitatis: nunc inhumana securitas et ne minimo quidem temporis uoluptates intermissae: uelut festis diebus id quoque gaudium accederet, exultabant, fruebantur, nulla partium cura, malis publicis laeti.*

### Vespasian's men do all in their power to take the Praetorian camp



Praetorian camp

3.84 The greatest difficulty was found in taking the Praetorian Camp, which the bravest of the Vitellians defended as their last hope. At this the Flavians were rendered even more determined, especially former praetorians in their ranks. They promptly brought into play every device invented for the destruction of the strongest of defences; artillery, earthworks, the tortoise shield-formation, and lighted brands; crying out that all the toil and danger they had endured in a host of battles would be crowned by this effort. 'The city will be returned to the senate and people of Rome, the shrines to their gods. A soldier's glory is in his camp: that is his city, there are his household deities. We must spend the night in arms if the camp is not swiftly taken.'

3.84 *plurimum molis in obpugnatione castrorum fuit, quae acerrimus quisque ut nouissimam spem retinebant. eo intentius uictores, praecipuo ueterum cohortium studio, cuncta ualidissimarum urbium excidiis reperta simul admouent, testudinem tormenta aggeres facesque, quidquid tot proeliis laboris ac periculi hausissent, opere illo consummari clamitantes. urbem senatui ac populo Romano, templa dis*

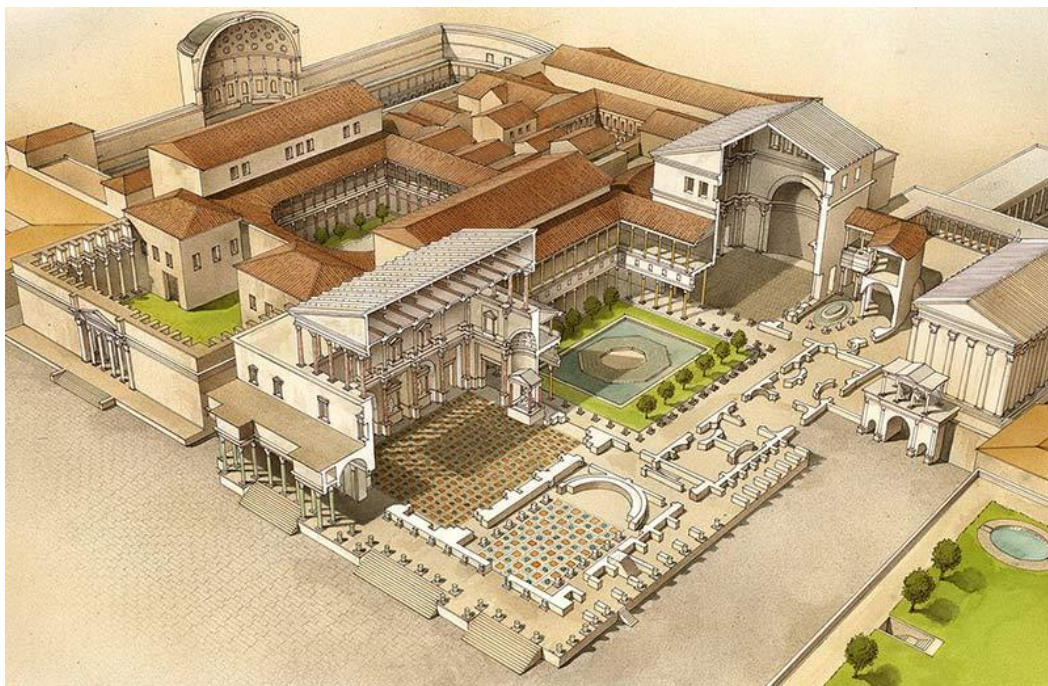
*reddita: proprium esse militis decus in castris: illam patriam, illos penatis. ni statim recipiantur, noctem in armis agendam.*

### Vitellius' soldiers fight to the last

**3.84** As against this, the Vitellians, though unequal in strength or good fortune, by troubling the victors, delaying the peace, and defiling the houses and altars with blood, took refuge in that last solace of the defeated. Many, mortally-stricken, breathed their last on the towers and battlements. When the gates were finally destroyed, a solid mass of survivors opposed the victors, and fell dealing blow for blow, facing the enemy, so anxious were they in dying to win a glorious end.

*3.84 contra Vitelliani, quamquam numero fatoque dispares, inquietare uictoriam, morari pacem, domos arasque cruore foedare suprema uictis solacia amplectebantur. multi semianimes super turris et propugnacula moenium expirauere: conuulsis portis reliquus globus obtulit se uictoribus, et cecidere omnes contrariis uulneribus, uersi in hostem: ea cura etiam morientibus decori exitus fuit*

### Vitellius, in a position to escape, returns to the palace



Palatium

**3.84** On the city being captured, Vitellius was carried in a sedan chair through the rear of the Palace to his wife's house on the Aventine, so that if he survived the day without being discovered he might escape to his brother and his forces at Terracina.



But his inconstant mind and the nature of great fear, which always makes the present situation seem most threatening to those who fear everything, drew him back to the empty palace, seemingly deserted by even the lowliest servants who had slipped away or perhaps took care to avoid meeting him.

*3.84 Vitellius capta urbe per auersam Palatii partem Auentinum in domum uxoris sellula defertur, ut si diem latebra uitauisset, Tarracinam ad cohortis fratremque perfugeret. dein mobilitate ingenii et, quae natura pauoris est, cum omnia metuenti praesentia maxime displicerent, in Palatium regreditur uastum desertumque, dilapsis etiam infimis seruitiorum aut occursum eius declinantibus. terret solitudo et tacentes loci;*

He tries to hide in the lavatory (?)



**3.84** He feared the solitude and the silent spaces; trying the closed doors, he shuddered to find only echoing rooms; weary of wandering in a state of gloom, he hid himself in shameful concealment, but was dragged forth by Julius Placidus, the cohort tribune. With his arms tied behind his back, his clothes torn, he was led away, a melancholy sight, many crying out against him, none in tears: the distastefulness of the final scene dispelling pity. A soldier from Germany came upon him and struck at him, perhaps in anger, perhaps to remove him more swiftly from insult, perhaps aiming at the tribune, it is uncertain: but he sliced off the tribune's ear and was immediately run through.

*3.84 temptat clausa, inhorrescit uacuis; fessusque misero errore et pudenda latebra semet occultans ab Iulio Placido tribuno cohortis protrahitur. uinctae pone tergum*

*manus; laniata ueste, foedum spectaculum, ducebatur, multis increpantibus, nullo inlacrimante: deformitas exitus misericordiam abstulerat. obuius e Germanicis militibus Vitellium infesto ictu per iram, uel quo maturius ludibrio eximeret, an tribunum adpetieri, in incerto fuit: aurem tribuni amputauit ac statim confossus est.*

### Vitellius' statues are pulled down and he is slaughtered



Mockery of Vitellius

3.85 A sword-point, Vitellius was forced now to offer his face to his captors' insults, now to witness the toppling of his statues and gaze again and again at the Rostra and the place of Galba's death, until finally the soldiers propelled him to the Gemonian Stairs, where Flavius Sabinus' body had lain\*. One utterance saved him from the charge of lack of nobility when, on being insulted by the tribune, he replied that, even so, he had been his emperor. Then he fell under a hail of blows. And the mob abused him when dead with the same perversity as they fawned on him while living.

\*Flavius Sabinus was Vespasian's brother: he tried to take over when Vitellius offered his resignation

*3.85 Vitellium infestis mucronibus coactum modo erigere os et offerre contumeliis, nunc cadentis statuas suas, plerumque rostra aut Galbae occisi locum contueri, postremo ad Gemonias, ubi corpus Flauii Sabini iacuerat, propulere. una uox non degeneris animi excepta, cum tribuno insultanti se tamen imperatorem eius fuisse respondit; ac deinde ingestis uulneribus concidit. et uulgus eadem prauitate insectabatur interfectum qua fouerat uiuentem.*

**The soldiers, their blood up, continue the slaughter**



Death of Vitellius

**4.1** Vitellius' death was the end of war rather than the start of peace. The victors, armed, pursued the defeated through the city streets with implacable hatred, the thoroughfares choked with corpses, the fora and the temples stained with blood, slaughtering everyone chance placed in their way. As their licence increased, they swiftly dragged out those in hiding; killing any who appeared young and fit, whether soldier or civilian.

*4.1 interfecto Vitellio bellum magis desierat quam pax coeperat. armati per urbem uictores implacabili odio uictos consecabantur: plene caedibus uiae, cruenta fora templaque, passim trucidatis, ut quemque fors obtulerat. ac mox augescente licentia scrutari ac protrahere abditos; si quem procerum habitu et iuuenta conspexerant, obtruncare nullo militum aut populi discrimine.*

## After the slaughter, the looting

4.1 Their savagery, sated by blood while their hatred was roused, then turned to avarice. No building was allowed to remain locked and bolted, on the pretext that Vitellians might be hiding there. This led to private houses being entered, with resistance an excuse for murder. And there was no lack of impoverished individuals among the mob, or base slaves, ready to betray their masters, while other victims were revealed by their friends. There were cries of lamentation everywhere, accompanying the ills of a captured city, so that the people longed for the mere arrogance of Otho's and Vitellius's soldiers which they had loathed before. The Flavian leaders who had been eager to fan the flames of civil war, were unable to rein in their success, for in times of violence and discord the worst elements wield most power, it is peace and quiet that demand the practice of virtue.

*4.1 quae saeuitia recentibus odiis sanguine explebatur, dein uerterat in auaritiam. nihil usquam secretum aut clausum sinebant, Vitellianos occultari simulantes. initium id perfringendarum domuum, uel si resisteretur, causa caedis; nec deerat egentissimus quisque e plebe et pessimi seruitiorum prodere ultro ditis dominos, alii ab amicis monstrabantur. ubique lamenta, conclamationes et fortuna captae urbis, adeo ut Othoniani Vitellianique militis inuidiosa antea petulantia desideraretur. duces partium accendendo ciuili bello acres, temperandae uictoriae impares, quippe inter turbas et discordias pessimo cuique plurima uis, pax et quies bonis artibus indigent.*

**Next week:** Vegetius' *Epitome of Military Science* (i)