

## “Anomalous” Year-beginnings in the Neronian Books of Tacitus’ *Annals*

The Neronian books of the *Annals* differ greatly from the mostly extant Tiberian narrative of Books 1-6. The differences, which affect structure, language and style, are perhaps due to the different nature of the principate under the two Julio-Claudians (Syme 1958, Adams 1972 and 1974, Martin 1981 and 1990, McCulloch 1984, Morford 1990). Thus the more annalistic character of the Tiberian books would reflect the appearance of republican government under Tiberius; the looser nature of the Neronian Books, on the other hand, would mirror the openly tyrannical character of the principate under the last Julio-Claudian. J. Ginsburg (1981), in a classic study that remains extremely useful, concluded that the more annalistic structure of Books 1-6 was more a matter of form than substance. One of her major points of discussion was the beginning-of-year narrative. In this paper, I shall examine Tacitus’ treatment of the beginning-of-year narrative in the Neronian books.

First, I shall offer an overview of the most common formula that Tacitus employs to date the year, namely the names of the two *consules ordinarii* expressed in the ablative absolute (*x, y, consulibus*). This formula, as far as we can tell, was inherited from Livy, who, in his traditional treatment of annalistic material, would place in the beginning-of-year sections those elements that were traditionally associated with the names of the consuls, namely wars, treaties, provincial administration and senatorial activity. But Tacitus, as I shall show, often rearranges the natural chronology of the events to suit his narrative strategy, often placing first an event to which the historian *decides* to assign a special significance: the emperor’s escapades, his performances at the games or, worst of all, the murder of his mother. The annalistic structure is thus manipulated into a dramatic narrative that serves the historian’s purposes. Within this frame, the two consuls simply date the year; the formula *x, y, consulibus* becomes ‘sclerotic’, a mere stylistic device which carries no weight – and may indeed reflect Tacitus’ own view on the current nature of that magistracy. The consular historian manipulates his narrative in a way that, by giving relevance to events and/or characters that are not related to the consuls, contributes to show the diminished importance of the old magistracy, and at the same time to underline the shifting role of the senate into a body of sycophantic *ignavi*.

Second, I shall examine those cases in which Tacitus departs from the ablative absolute formula, and thus show how a simple variation of a grammatical construction can underline subtle differences in the arrangement of material that the historian chooses to select for the narrative of that year. Since there are only two such instances in the Neronian books, they are especially significant, and must carry a distinctive purpose. In the first case, the ‘anomalous’ formula introduces the year 58. This was the last

year of Nero's traditional *quinquennium*. Its consuls were the direct descendants of the consuls of 31 BC. Tacitus thus alerts his readers to the importance of these events. The second anomaly in the dating formula is the year 65, the longest narrative-year of the *Annals*, which is mostly devoted to the narrative of the Pisonian Conspiracy. Tacitus, as I will argue, conceived the Pisonian Conspiracy as a self-contained narrative unit, a piece of literary 'bravura' that would rival past accounts of conspiracies, above all Sallust's monograph, to which he alludes in his portrait of Calpurnio Piso.

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