

The Supernatural in Tacitus

When compared with his predecessor Livy, Tacitus has been said to be less interested in the “supernatural,” a rubric under which we include the prodigies and omens of traditional Roman religion; characters’ participation in forms of religious expression, both traditional and non-normative; and nebulous superhuman forces such as fate and fortune. In this panel, we seek to modify this perception by investigating aspects of the superhuman, religious, and/or inexplicable in Tacitus’ works that contribute in important ways to his historiographical project and to our view of Tacitus as an historian. As the most recent contribution on this topic shows (K. Shannon-Henderson, *Religion and Memory in Tacitus’ Annals*. Oxford, 2019), religion and its related fields are extremely important to Tacitus’ narrative technique, and ‘irrational’ elements such as *fatum* and *fortuna* are constantly at play in Tacitus’ works, particularly, but not exclusively, in his historical narratives. Each of the five papers that we have gathered for this panel addresses these topics from different angles, whether focusing more on the literary, historical, or linguistic elements of the Tacitean narrative under examination. Two papers focus on omens and other ways of predicting the future; two examine religious experiences of Tacitus’ characters; and one considers the role of *fortuna* in the world of the *Dialogus*.

In the first paper, Contributor #1 examines the value of observing supernatural signs for decision-making in the *Histories*. In particular, s/he looks at the practical value of observing and interpreting supernatural signs as predictors of the future success or failure of military leaders. How a certain sign is interpreted can influence the outcome of events positively (e.g. the omen predicting that Vespasian would become emperor, *Hist.* 2.78) or negatively (e.g. the Jews’ misunderstanding of the prodigy at *Hist.* 5.13). This paper argues that these phenomena, no

matter their outcome, are inextricably woven into the Tacitean narrative, and affect decision-making processes.

Contributor #2 analyzes Tacitus' use of chance omens: ordinary gestures or utterances that provide an unexpected glimpse of the future. Such stories are often considered folkloric and unworthy of belief, and hence not (we might think) appropriate for 'serious' historiography. Yet as Contributor #2 argues, Tacitus goes out of his way to build authority for this popular and rumor-laden category of omens, and defends them by proving that they are well-documented (e.g. Nero's dedication of a dagger inscribed *IOVI VINDICI* at *Ann.* 15.74.2, which inadvertently predicted Julius Vindex's revolt) or congruent with the character of the people involved (e.g. Tiberius' prediction of Galba's accession at *Ann.* 6.20.2, the result of that emperor's noted *providentia* and interest in astrology).

Contributor #3 takes into consideration two specific episodes, one from *Histories* 2 and one from *Annals* 1, which show a marked parallelism. Each episode features a member of the imperial family who is suddenly attacked by a desire for a religious experience. Titus, on his way to Rome to show support for Galba, delays his journey after Galba's murder and decides to visit the temple of Aphrodite at Paphos, and is later censured for this visit. Similarly, Germanicus decides to visit the site of the Varian disaster at Teutoberg during his campaigns against the mutinous legions, and is censured by Tiberius. As Contributor #3 shows, in both cases Tacitus appears to characterize the men's religious 'desire' (*cupido*) as 'foreign,' perhaps a sign of a loss of *Romanitas*, as both episodes occur at the edge of the empire.

Contributor #4 focuses on the accusation of *superstitio externa* against Pomponia Graecina in 57 CE (*Ann.* 13.32.2-3). She was a member of the aristocracy, and had lived most of her life in grief, mourning for her cousin Iulia, who had fallen victim to the machinations of

Messalina. Both her un-Roman religious practices and her excessive mourning, Contributor #4 argues, represent two modes of resistance to imperial politics. First, in terms of religious practice (perhaps Christianity?), Pomponia's choice appears strikingly independent, and it is only because Nero remitted her to her husband for the trial that she was acquitted. Second, her multi-year mourning period was not customary, and therefore striking. In this way, Pomponia's behavior showed resistance to a conspicuous example of imperial injustice. It was only her elite status, in the end, that saved her.

Finally, Contributor #5 expands our investigation to the *opera minora* with a consideration of a reference to the Wheel of Fortune at *Dial.* 23, itself an allusion to Cicero's *In Pisonem* 22. For Cicero, *fortuna* can act as an engine of just reciprocity; in its latter role, it punishes Piso with *infamia* as the just deserts of his debauchery. When Tacitus' Aper invokes this passage, however, the principate has curtailed free speech and the *delatores* are the most prominent representatives of oratory. *Fortuna* in the world of the *Dialogus* cannot straightforwardly punish transgressors with *infamia* as it could for Cicero; instead, it is used by the characters to consider vicissitudes in literary styles and the metaphysical rewards of other genres, like poetry and history.