

Supernatural Signs and Decision-making in the *Histories* of Tacitus

This paper examines the value of observing supernatural signs for decision-making in Tacitus' *Histories*. In the *Histories* and elsewhere in his corpus, Tacitus reflects explicitly and implicitly on what types of information most contribute to an honorable and successful public career based on prudence and practical wisdom for the Roman citizen (*Agr.* 4). In this paper I want to consider the observation of supernatural signs as a skill that might contribute specifically to the decision-making process in the *Histories*. Does Tacitus affirm the value of supernatural signs specifically for decision-making? Are supernatural signs reliably accurate predictors of the future in the first place? Leaving aside issues of religious ritual, I want to consider the practical value of taking into consideration perceived supernatural signs for the leader in the field.

Supernatural signs are, among other things, affirmations of or warnings against future events. Actors in history can notionally exploit this advance knowledge to determine the most successful course of action. I will first survey a few examples of supernatural signs to show that they have the potential to influence the decisions figures of authority and entire armies make in the *Histories*. At 1.62 an eagle flying in front of the Vitellian forces in the initial stages of their march southward is taken as a positive omen. At 2.78, when he is weighing making a bid for the principate, Vespasian remembers an omen of a cypress tree on his property that fell and sprang back up. At this pivotal moment in his life, he interprets that unusual event as presaging his successful attainment of the empire. The *Histories* thus affirm the potential value of supernatural signs for those able to identify them accurately and interpret them correctly. A prodigy during the Jewish revolt foretells the takeover by the East of the world (5.13). The narrator makes clear that the prophecy was correct but the Jews misunderstood to whom it referred: Vespasian, not the Jews. As we see with that example, Tacitus also makes clear that the processes of identifying

and interpreting supernatural signs are far from fool-proof. Chance events are noted to have been incorrectly identified as omens, such as at 4.26 where a natural period of low flow of the Rhine causes the Roman legionaries to think the gods are against them in the Batavian revolt. Correctly identified omens still may be incorrectly or incompletely interpreted (5.13 and 2.78). This brief survey of selected passages featuring supernatural signs will show the complexity with which Tacitus weaves them into the narrative. By focusing on the challenge of getting supernatural signs right and the misperception of chance phenomena Tacitus offers us an opportunity to interpret his inclusion of this material not only in a religious context but also in a decision-making one. Tacitus himself spurs his readers to think critically about the real time value of supernatural signs in his survey of the empire at the outset of the work when he writes that omens predicting Vespasian's successful establishment gained credence only in hindsight (1.10).

We are long past doubting Tacitus the quindecimvir's sincerity with regard to Roman religion, but we must ask whether one lesson of the *Histories* concerns the unreliability of using supernatural signs to guide one's conduct in the real time of military decision-making. Bringing various modes of knowledge to bear on forming plans within the context of the unpredictable development of events is a theme of the *Histories*. Stoic philosopher Musonius Rufus attempts to prevent the Flavian assault on Rome by an injection of philosophical reasoning into the Flavian and Vitellian forces lined up opposite one another. Tacitus dismisses this tragically comical attempt to make peace as *intempestivam sapientiam*, philosophy not right for the moment (3.81). We see there an attempt to harness a mode of knowledge to influence the direction of civil war. One book before, the more pragmatic and seasoned general Suetonius Paulinus was under no illusions that soldiers itching for a fight can be dissuaded (2.37). While

Tacitus often pushes gullibility or confusion off onto the crowd prone to think every stirring leaf is a divine message or naive individuals like Musonius, he is making a more serious point that leadership and good decision-making require particular forms of knowledge and experience. A consideration of the observation and interpretation of supernatural signs within this context demonstrates that in the *Histories* they are unlikely to contribute to making prudent decisions in the field.

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