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978-1-107-01110-6 - The Annals of Tacitus: Book 11

Edited with a Commentary by S. J. V. Malloch

Excerpt

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INTRODUCTION

I. *ANNALS* 11: CONTENT, STRUCTURE,
AND CHRONOLOGY

Annals 11 is the first of two extant books, and probably the third of an original four,¹ that narrate the reign of Claudius. The extant portion opens in the narrative year 47 and extends into 48 (23.1). It is a matter of speculation how much more the earlier part of the book contained,² but we can be sure that T. treated the assumption of the censorship by Claudius and L. Vitellius³ and Aulus Plautius' *ovatio* for the conquest of Britain,⁴ which Syme reasonably suggested was an opportunity to recount the campaigns in Britain subsequent to 43;⁵ and it is possible that T. narrated a foiled or alleged plot against Claudius, which in Dio/Xiph. (60.29.4) provides the context for Asiaticus' fall, and the removal of Cn. Pompeius Magnus, whose death Dio/Zon. (60.29.6a) associates with Asiaticus'.⁶ Messalina's involvement (cf. Dio/Xiph. 60.29.6a) in this wave of destruction would have made the material attractive to T. (cf. 1–3, 28.2).

The following table lists the items treated in the extant text of *Annals* 11; a date that takes into consideration evidence independent of T. is provided where possible. The list illustrates well

¹ Two books for Gaius and four for Claudius, a 'hexad', as with the Tiberian books. See Syme (1958) 256; *RE* Suppl. XI 474; Sage (1990) 964, 968; Martin (1994) 162.

² Syme (1958) 256: *Annals* 11 picks up 'some way through' the book; Martin (1984) 144: 'in the middle' of the book.

³ See 13–14n.

⁴ T. refers to his notice of Plautius' *ovatio* at 13.32.2 *Plautio, quem ouasse de Britannis rettuli*; cf. Suet. *Claud.* 24.3; Dio/Xiph. 60.30.2; Eutr. 7.13.2–4.

⁵ (1958) 260.

⁶ Cf. Sen. *Apocol.* 11.2, 11.5; T. *Hist.* 1.48.1; Suet. *Claud.* 27.2, 29.1–2; Malloch (2009b). The connection between Pompeius and Asiaticus may only be thematic, unless the theme of 'men brought down by Messalina on false charges' applies specifically to the year 47, which appears to be how Boissvain (1895–1926: on 60.29.6a) took it.

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T.'s use of a traditional narrative structure that interwove events at Rome and abroad (cf. 8–10n.), his manipulation of chronology (8.1n.), and his capacity for expanding on one theme: the death of Messalina (26–38). His adoption of a freer narrative structure is a prominent feature of the later *Annals*; but it is not a radical break from the Tiberian *Annals* (where theme can be elevated over chronology: e.g. 6.38.1), nor is it a departure from the practice of T.'s republican historiographical predecessors: the elder Cato, Livy, and Sallust all offered models of narratives that privileged theme over chronology.⁷

The Year 47

- 1–3 Trial and death of D. Valerius Asiaticus
- 4 Destruction of the brothers Petra
- 5–7 The *lex Cincia*
- 8–10 (*sub idem tempus*) Eastern affairs (8–10n.)
- 8.1, 9.1 Mithridates returns to Armenia: 41 (8.1n.)
 - 9.4 Capitulation of Seleucia to Vardanes *septimo post defectionem anno*: 41 (8.1n.)
- 10.4 Death of Vardanes: probably 45 (10.4n.)
- 10.4 Parthian request for Meherdates: between 45 and 48 (10.4n.)
- 11.1 (*isdem consulibus*) *ludi saeculares*: probably in June 47 (11.1n.)
 - 12 The start of Messalina's affair with C. Silius.
- 13–14 Claudius' censorship: from 47 (March?) to 48 (August?) (13–14n.)
 - 13.1 Edict against *lasciua* in the theatre
 - 13.2 Law against *saeuitia* of creditors
 - 13.2 Introduction of aqueducts into Rome (date disputed: see 13.3n.)
- 13.2–14.3 Additions to the Latin alphabet (14.3n.)
 - 15 Reform of the *haruspices*

⁷ See further Malloch (2009a); Rich (2011).

2. TACITUS AND CLAUDIUS

- 16–17 (*eodem anno*) Claudius sends Italicus to the Cherusci
 18–20.2 (*per idem tempus*) Corbulo's legateship of lower
 Germany: from 46 (18.in.)
 20.3 (*nec multo post*) Curtius Rufus' legateship of upper
 Germany: no earlier than 45, no later than 49/50
 (21.in.)
 22.1 (*interea*) Cn. Nonius' failed attempt on Claudius' life
 22.2 (*isdem consulibus*) P. Dolabella's motion on the
 quaestorship
 22.3–6 Digression on the history of the quaestorship

The Year 48

- 23.1 *A. Vitellio L. Vipstano consulibus* (23.in.)
 23.1–25.1 The admission of *primores Galliae* to the Roman senate
 25.2 (*isdem diebus*) Adlections to the patricians
 25.3–4 *lectio senatus*
 25.5 The end of Claudius' censorship (see above on 13–14);
 census of Roman citizens (25.5n.)
 26–38 The fall of Messalina. T. places her Bacchic party in
 autumn (31.2 *adulto autumnno*)

The year 48 extends to 12.4.3.

2. TACITUS AND CLAUDIUS

With the benefit of hindsight T. can single out a moment for emphasis which may seem trivial when viewed from a contemporary perspective.⁸ Claudius is the subject of one such moment in AD 20. Thanks are proposed in the senate to individual members of the imperial family for avenging the death of Germanicus. L. Asprenas draws attention to the omission of Claudius' name, and it is added at the end.⁹ Pondering the

⁸ An earlier version of parts of this section was set out in Malloch (2009a).

⁹ Note that at *SCPP* 148 Claudius is the last member of the imperial family to be thanked.

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moment, insignificant in itself, T. is struck by ‘the mockeries made of mortal affairs in every business: in fame, in hope, and in veneration everyone was destined for imperial power rather than the future *princeps* whom fortune was keeping in hiding’ (3.18.4). T. clearly relished the irony of the situation, and it gave him the opportunity to glance forward in his work.¹⁰ In 20 Claudius had been forgotten, as he would later be in 41 before the discovery that resulted in his elevation to empire;¹¹ and his liminal presence under Tiberius prefigures his marginality in his own reign. Claudius’ passivity will become the central feature of T.’s portrait of an emperor dominated by his wives and freedmen.¹² T. is explicit: Claudius was ‘submissive to spouses’ commands’ (12.1.1), and later he remarks, *nihil arduum uidebatur in animo principis, cui non iudicium, non odium erat nisi indita et iussa* (12.3.2).¹³ T. pushes Claudius’ passivity so far that he is displaced as the focus of his own history: Claudius ends up a character in other people’s stories. In the extant text these dramatic stories revolve around the fall of Messalina, the power of the freedmen, the domination of Agrippina, and the rise of Nero. The portraits of Messalina the sexual fiend and Agrippina the scheming, power-hungry *dominatrix* become delineated as the women take the stage. The freedmen’s ability to manipulate and control Claudius with devastating effect is shown in their destruction of Messalina. These characterisations in turn reflect back on Claudius as a husband and ruler, and more generally criticise a system that allowed women and subordinates excessive political power.

¹⁰ For proleptic notices in T. see 25.5n.

¹¹ Suet. *Claud.* 10.2; Dio 60.1.2. As Woodman-Martin on 3.18.4 well point out, T.’s reference to fortune’s (*fortuna*) keeping Claudius in hiding (*in occulto*) is ‘presumably a sardonic allusion’ to Claudius’ hiding behind a curtain on Gaius’ death and his later chance discovery and elevation to empire.

¹² For Claudius’ domination by his wives see 28.2n.; by his freedmen, see 1.3n., 26–38n. For Claudius’ depiction in the ancient sources see Syme (1958) 259–60, 436–7; Momigliano (1961) 78; Vessey (1971); Griffin (1982) 418, (1990) 483–4, (1994); Huzar (1984) 617; Martin (1990) 1579, (1994) 144, 150; Hurley (2001) 14–17.

¹³ T. also focalises commentary on Claudius through Silius (26.2) and the imperial freedmen (28.2).

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2. TACITUS AND CLAUDIUS

Annals 11 culminates in thirteen vivid chapters describing the doom of Messalina. The episode is preceded by the simultaneous termination of Claudius' censorship and his ignorance of palace affairs (25.5 *condiditque lustrum . . . isque illi finis inscitiae erga domum suam fuit*), which closes, 'ring style', the final portion of T.'s account of Claudius' censorship that resumed at 13.1 with a statement of his ignorance of his marital situation and his exercise of censorial duties (*at Claudius, matrimonii sui ignarus et munia censoria usurpans*). Claudius' passivity has already been demonstrated during the downfall of D. Valerius Asiaticus and Poppaea Sabina (1–4) and is ironically heightened by his newly gained knowledge: T. switches focus from his censorship to Messalina and Silius (26.1) – and practically omits Claudius from the story until 31.¹⁴ T. works hard to emphasise Claudius' marginality. The reaction to the wedding of Messalina and Silius is not led by Claudius (cf. 25.5n.) but by Narcissus, an influential freedman at the centre of power in the imperial *domus* (28–9). Narcissus distinguishes himself by bringing Messalina's affair to Claudius' attention, and Claudius ultimately gives him complete control over the response (29.2–3, 33). He dominates the events – *omnia liberto oboediebant* (35.1) – and even marginalises Messalina as part of his strategy of destroying her (cf. 34.2–3, 37.2). His energy in pursuing his goal contrasts with the fear (31.1), agitation (33), confusion (34.1), and silence (35.1) that define Claudius' reaction. Finally, the dining scene that rather perversely follows the slaughter of Silius and his associates brings out the worst in Claudius: only food and wine put him in the mood to summon Messalina to plead her case (37.2), and later, unmoved at the news of her death, 'he requested a cup and celebrated the party as usual' (38.2). The convivial context adds more negative connotations to his passivity, and, by

¹⁴ Claudius' removal to Ostia at 26.3 is focalised through Messalina's planning and is primarily a plot device. At 30 T. is concerned with Messalina's denouncers, and he brings Claudius into full view only when he summons his advisory council at 31.1.

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evoking the incompatibility between dining and death already exploited in the case of Poppaea Sabina (2.2), T. emphasises the inappropriateness of Claudius' handling of the situation.

Claudius has reached a low point from which he will not recover. His marriage to Agrippina is decided by his freedmen (12.1.1–3.1), who are at the zenith of their domination, and L. Vitellius, that political weathercock (12.4.1; cf. 11.34.1), assists by pursuing Agrippina's enemies and winning over the senate (12.4.12.5.2–6.3). Behind the freedmen and Vitellius looms the figure of Agrippina, who T. says had long been insinuating herself into Claudius' confidence and affections (12.3.1). The wedding brings to Claudius' principate a new phase, which T. associates with Agrippina, who now propels the narrative (see 26–38 n.). She begins to assert a masculine domination; austere and more often arrogant in public, she was not unchaste in private except to advance her power (12.7.3), a sinister foreshadowing of allegations of her incest with Nero.¹⁵ Agrippina reduces Claudius' authority by her presence at the reception of Caratacus (12.37.4; see below) and at the spectacle on Lake Fucinus (12.56.3), and she exerts a destructive influence over him in politics (12.59.1). T. further blackens Claudius' performances in the senate in *Annals* 12 by indicting his complaisance (12.61.2; cf. 11.28.2) and the political power of the freedmen (12.53.2–3, 12.60.4).

Once T. has Agrippina establish her influence over Claudius, he has her scheme to place Nero in the line of succession. *Annals* 12 charts his rise to power: from his marriage to Claudius' daughter Octavia (12.3, 12.9, 12.58) and his adoption by Claudius (12.25–26), to his assumption of power on Claudius' death (12.68–69.2). Nero's accession closes an account of one principate that has become increasingly preoccupied with the next. The ultimate demonstration of this tendency is T.'s refusal to commemorate Claudius' life with an obituary. That would have

¹⁵ *Ann.* 14.2; *Suet. Ner.* 28.2. Agrippina had supposedly committed incest earlier with her brother, the *princeps* Gaius: *Suet. Cal.* 24.1, 36.1; *Dio* 59.3.6, 59.22.6, 59.26.5; Ginsburg (2006) 116.

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2. TACITUS AND CLAUDIUS

interrupted the forward thrust of the narrative by awkwardly shifting the focus back to Claudius, and it would have accorded him an importance which the preceding narrative had deliberately denied him. Appropriately, T. focalises a brief summary through the funeral eulogy given by Nero (13.3.1), and parts of Nero's subsequent speech to the senate can also be read as a commentary on Claudius' principate (13.4).

These dramatic stories convey T.'s version of the hostile portrait of Claudius that so dominates the historical tradition. Occasionally, however, one glimpses a different Claudius.¹⁶ Claudius' cap on fees for advocates (7.3) seems a reasonable compromise between turning a blind eye to enormous fees and banning them altogether, and an acknowledgement of the needs of poorer advocates. Some items of his censorship (13.2: law against creditors and the building of aqueducts) and his attempt to preserve the art of the haruspices (15) are recorded neutrally. But in particular Claudius shines in his support of the admission of the *primores Galliae* to the Roman senate (24). T. gives him a speech that demonstrates more sophistication and acuity than both the one that the emperor Claudius himself delivered (*ILS* 212 = appendix, below) and the one that he gives to the Gauls' opponents (23). Claudius' successful endorsement of the Gauls implies that T. himself supported his openness to the participation of provincials in the Roman political process.¹⁷

But these are mere glimpses. And, crucially, T. does not explicitly praise Claudius' conduct in these moments. Frequently he seems to present Claudius positively only to blacken his conduct. Claudius' censorship and conduct of foreign affairs are cases in point. T.'s return to the censorship at 13.1 offers a contrast between Claudius' ignorance of the scandal in his palace

¹⁶ There is a '*chiaroscuro* mixture of good and bad' in the tradition on Claudius, according to Griffin (1994) 307; cf. (1982) 418, (1990a) 483–4. Aspects of Claudius' administration are praised by Suetonius (*Claud.* 11–2, 14, 18–19, 20, 21.1, 22) and Dio (60.3.1–8.3, 60.8.7, 60.11.3–5, 60.12, 60.13.5, 60.19–22.2, 60.28.1, 60.30.6a [Zon.]).

¹⁷ See 23–25.in.; Malloch (2009a) 124–6.

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and his concurrent concern for public morality. The closing stages of the censorship (following, in narrative sequence, his strong performance in the senate for the *primores Galliae*) present Claudius at his best in the extant text. T. observes the great joy with which Claudius undertook to augment the patriciate (25.2), his new and mild method of revising the senate (25.3), and his refusal of the proposal urged by an ‘excessively indulgent’ consul that he take the title *pater senatus* (25.4). Claudius’ competence and dignity pave the way for the highly artificial intersection of the closure of his censorship and the proleptic notice of his subsequent knowledge of Messalina’s involvement with Silius (25.5): this salutary acquisition of knowledge could hardly have been foregrounded by a hostile characterisation. But T. denies Claudius a change for the better by stating that he was forced to take notice of and punish Messalina’s outrages, by looking forward to his incestuous marriage to Agrippina, and by portraying him as dominated, scared, and in his cups during Messalina’s downfall. The return of narrative focus to palace affairs ushers in the Claudius of old.

In his funeral speech for Claudius, Nero observes that under Claudius no disaster befell the empire from foreigners, an observation well received by the crowd (13.3.1 *nihil regente eo triste rei publicae ab externis accidisse pronis animis audita*). It was easy praise: Claudius appointed capable men and followed the non-aggressive policies of his predecessors in Germany and the east.¹⁸ But Nero is silent about Claudius’ greatest claim to fame: his conquest of Britain. *Annals* 11 and 12 testify to Claudius’ interest and competence in handling foreign affairs – receiving embassies (10.4; cf. 16.1), dispatching kings (8.1, 16.1; 12.11), instructing client kings (9.2; 12.20.2), appointing, ordering, and rewarding governors (19.3–20.2, 20.3; 12.29.2, 12.40.1, 12.54.4; cf. 12.48.3) – but equally T. undermines Claudius. Corbulo’s critics reasonably point out that his activities in the north

¹⁸ See 8–10n., 16–17n. In the same breath Nero celebrates Claudius’ scholarly pursuits: *liberalium quoque artium commemoratio*.

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threaten the peace, but in recalling Corbulo (and thus potentially avoiding the kind of disaster of which Nero later speaks) T. has Claudius follow a minority opinion that points out the threat a successful Corbulo posed to his position (19.3). T. makes Claudius respond to Eunones' letter about the fate of Mithridates VIII, king of Bosphorus, with a mixture of doubt, resentment, and bloody-mindedness, and the sounder advice of others prevails (12.20.1). In both examples Claudius' reaction recalls his conduct in domestic and palace politics: emotional, doubtful, and dependent on the judgements of others. The topos of his enslavement to his wives will also surface in the context of foreign affairs in the role Agrippina plays in the presentation of the captured British king Caratacus at Rome (12.37.4).

T. rarely lets Claudius escape the defining features of his portrait. Moments in which he is allowed to display competence are undermined by criticism or isolated: they throw into sharper relief, rather than adjust, the wider hostile picture.

3. THE MANUSCRIPTS

The second Medicean

(Codex Laurentianus Mediceus 68.2)

The text of *Annals* 11–16 and *Histories* 1–5 depends upon a single manuscript, Laurentianus Mediceus 68.2, the so-called second Medicean (M),¹⁹ written in Beneventan script at Monte Cassino in the first half of the abbacy of Desiderius (1058–87).²⁰

¹⁹ To distinguish it from Laurentianus Mediceus 68.1, the 'first Medicean', which preserves an incomplete text of *Annals* 1–6.

²⁰ Script and home: Lowe (1929) 260, 263–5 = (1972) 1.291, 294–5; Newton (1999) 97, 101. Lowe's argument ([1929] 260–5 = [1972] 1.291–5) that the second Medicean was written during the abbacy of Richerius (1038–55) was standard doctrine until, on the basis of script and decoration, Newton (1999: 96–107) demonstrated that a date in the first half of the abbacy of Desiderius is preferable. Since 'common' books such as the second Medicean lag behind handsome 'service' books by several years, Newton (1999: 100) rules

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The second Medicean ultimately descends from an ancient manuscript written in rustic capitals, but the measurement of displaced passages in *Histories* 3 suggests at least one intermediate ancestor in minuscule.²¹ The start of the second Medicean suggests that it did not originally contain the earlier part of *Annals* 11 but was copied from an exemplar or descended from a more remote ancestor that had lost what preceded (1.11.). Uncertainty attends the origin of the exemplar from which it was copied. The suggestion that *Annals* 11–16 and *Histories* 1–5 had been in Italy since antiquity has failed to win many converts,²² and the more common explanation is that the exemplar came from Germany,²³ perhaps from Fulda at some point before the middle of the eleventh century.²⁴ Monte Cassino had links with Germany during the period that produced the second Medicean,²⁵ and to that country is owed the survival of T.'s other works: to Fulda the first Medicean

out a date at the start of Desiderius' abbacy and, at the other extreme, a date as late as the Peter Damian manuscripts of the 1070s, MC 358 and 359.

²¹ So Tarrant in Reynolds (1983) 407; Römer (1991) 2303. Brunhölzl (1971: 22–7) argued that some errors in the second Medicean were caused by copying from an ancient codex written in cursive. The text that the second Medicean offers, he concludes, is older than one dares to hope. Is it too daring to suggest that it goes back to T.?

²² Italian origin: Zelzer (1973); Cavallo (1975) 388–91; cf. Lowe (1929) 268 = (1972) 1.298; Tenney (1935) 352; Oliver (1976) 191 n.5.

²³ Römer (1991) 2303. Newton (1999: 104–7) is prepared to doubt a German origin, but suggests that Germany influenced the cultural context in which the exemplar was copied.

²⁴ For (possible) links between Monte Cassino and Fulda, see Lowe (1929) 268–70 = (1972) 1.298–9. Fulda may have had a complete manuscript of T. (perhaps a fourth-century one in rustic capitals), a copy or a part of a copy of which dating to the ninth century travelled south to Italy in the following century and a half (Ulery [1986] 91–2). Tarrant (in Reynolds [1983] 407 n.2) argues that the second Medicean is 'more seriously corrupt than [the first Medicean] in ways that make descent from separate ancient exemplars seem likely'.

²⁵ For such links in the first half of the Desiderian period: Newton (1999) 105; under previous abbots: Lowe (1929) 266–70 = (1972) 1.297–300. Desiderius' predecessor, Richerius, was German.