

CLAUDIUS AND THE DIGRESSIONS IN TACITUS

In some of the most impressive of the Appendices to his *Tacitus* (pp. 703—710), Sir Ronald Syme argues that a great part of the numerous antiquarian digressions found in Annals XI and XII is derived directly from learned disquisitions of the emperor Claudius, delivered in the Senate and recorded in the *acta* of that body. The extant speech concerning the admission of Gallic chieftains to the senate (I. L. S. 212) illustrates both the type of obscure learning to which that emperor treated his audience and the style which he adopted on these occasions. In this case Tacitus has retained the form of a speech for his discussion of the subject (Ann. xi. 24), though with considerable modifications; and so he clearly did with the emperor's speech on the island of Cos (Ann. xii. 61), though here of course the original is lost. Elsewhere comparable matter is given by the historian in the form of digressions; and, in view of Syme's arguments, it is difficult to doubt that much of the matter and many of the actual locutions are due to Claudius' similar speeches or edicts on the alphabet (xi. 14), the quaestorship (xi. 22), the pomerium (xii. 23—24) and the patricians (xii. 25. 2) — perhaps also on the city of Byzantium (xii. 63), although the language here is so closely modelled on Sallust (Syme, pp. 707, 730) that Claudius' contribution is questionable. Certainly this passage contains no recognisable Claudian phraseology, and the

subject-matter is entirely free from those unorthodox historical views which colour most of the other digressions in question.

More provocative is Syme's argument that Claudius' speeches likewise provided matter for three digressions of the same type which occur not in his own reign but in that of Tiberius. The account of Mons Caelius (iv. 65) contains details both of history ¹⁾ and of vocabulary clearly derived from the extant speech on the Gallic senators, as was remarked, without comment, by Furneaux, ad loc. ²⁾ That on the urban prefecture (vi. 11) is marked by details not in the orthodox historical tradition, but has no traceable verbal echoes. And that on the growth of legislation (iii. 26—28) has no material indicating Claudius as source, though points of language which do. In particular, the phrase 'postquam regum pertaesum' (26. 3) recalls Claudius' own words in I. L. S. 212, 'pertaesum est mentes regni'; though the verb is Sallustian (Hist. iii. 61. 8), and Syme himself points out that official terminology (if this is such) might be borrowed from one reign to the next with minor modifications (p. 703, n. 5). Again, the words 'accitis quae usquam egregia' (27. 1) recall the phrase attributed by Tacitus to Claudius in his version of the speech on the Gallic senators (xi. 24. 1), 'transferendo huc quod usquam egregium fuerit', the original of which may have stood in the lost passage in the middle of Claudius' speech, where he dealt with the citizenship³⁾. The likenesses are curious, if not individually convincing.

Syme advances his arguments concerning the Claudian elements in these passages largely for the purpose of demonstrating the wide range of documents upon which Tacitus drew while composing the *Annals*, in this case the *acta senatus* ⁴⁾. Yet no matter how closely the historian quotes the emperor's speeches, it remains open to doubt whether he found the speeches in the *acta* or, already copied out and perhaps abbreviated, in the pages of a historian of an earlier generation. Vitting-

1) For discrepancies between the two accounts of Vibenna (ignored by Syme), see E. Hahn, *Die Exkurse in den Annalen des T.* (1933), pp. 58—59. She takes no account of the verbal parallels.

2) For bibliography on the speech, see now C. Questa, *Studi sulle fonti degli Annales di T.* (1960), pp. 194—195.

3) Cf. also the similar use of *accitis* in Ann. xi. 15.1, a paraphrase of Claudius' speech in the senate on the haruspices.

4) So, for the antiquarian digressions, Hahn, o. c., p. 95; though ib. 96 she admits the possibility of an intermediate source.

hoff⁵), quoted with some impatience by Syme (p. 710, n. 6), is entirely reasonable in refusing to come down on one side or the other in the dispute, so far at least as it concerns his particular subject, the speech on the Gallic senators. Some further considerations may hint where the truth lies.

In a revealing footnote (p. 709, n. 1) Syme admits much of the weakness of his position. Dio, he points out, has a digression on eclipses (lx. 26. 1), immediately following an account of Claudius' edict to prevent panic when an eclipse occurred⁶), and evidently paraphrasing it. "It is not certain", Syme concludes, "that Tacitus was the only author to use Claudius as excuse and material for an excursus". The implication is surprising: that Dio, who is not usually supposed to have had recourse to documentary sources, has here, in the reign of Claudius, as if copying Tacitus' example but entirely independently of him, referred directly to the *acta* for this one imperial utterance. Since book LXI of Dio exists only in epitome, we cannot be certain that other speeches or edicts of Claudius were not similarly exploited; but even if this could be shown, it would make no difference to the initial improbability.

But Syme's inference concerning Dio's procedure concerning this digression does not stand up to close examination. The Greek historian clearly used for the reign of Claudius sources no worse than those employed by Tacitus or Suetonius⁷); and prominent among them, probably from the year 43, were the thirty-one books of the elder Pliny *a fine Aufidii Bassi*⁸). Ending as it did with the establishment of the Flavian peace, this work covered rather less than thirty-one years⁹). Allowing for the fact that the Civil War of 69 and Titus' Jewish campaigns may have taken up a disproportionate amount of space (as they must have done in Tacitus' *Histories*), well over half a book on average is left for each year of Claudius' and Nero's

5) *Hermes* lxxxii (1954), p. 363.

6) Not the most foolish of Claudius' edicts: see Suet. Cl. 16.4.

7) I am not prepared to accept the thesis of Gercke (*Seneca-Studien*, p. 177, etc.), followed by Questa (o. c., p. 42, etc.), that Dio used only one of the literary sources; but this question hardly affects the issue.

8) See especially my arguments in *Hermes* lxxxix (1961), p. 233.

9) Mendell, *Tacitus*, p. 47, cannot have considered the scale of the work when he suggested that it began only in 54, giving nearly two years to a book.

reigns. Even if Pliny's books were as short as, say, book XIII of the *Annals*, with 58 chapters, he must have needed a good deal of material to fill out the allotment. For certain years we have some idea how he did it. Under the year 57 Tacitus has no more than three short chapters of minor senatorial and other business, including a rebuke to certain writers who discoursed on the construction of Nero's wooden amphitheatre (xiii. 31. 1). As most critics have agreed, the reference is to Pliny, whose interest in these very details is shown by N. H. xvi. 200. The amount of trivial and curious matters in Pliny's thirty-one books would presumably amaze even those who know the thirty-seven of the *Natural Histories*.

Now for the year 45, when Dio's astronomical digression occurs, Tacitus' account is lost. Dio himself has one longish chapter of public business; and one other concerning the eclipse. Yet Pliny must have had a considerable bulk of material on this year, including a much fuller version, drawn from the public records, of the items abbreviated by Dio. For variety, what is more likely than that Pliny seized upon Claudius' edict, as he found it in the *acta*, senatorial or public, and quoted largely what the emperor had to say about a subject which was to concern him on its own account in N. H. ii. 47—48? Whether he did this simply as a paraphrase of the edict or made it into a formal digression, as Dio has it, we cannot detect. Either way, Dio's adaptation for his own work was easy. It need cause no surprise that there is no close similarity between the précis of Claudius as it appears in Dio and the full account of eclipses, based on Greek astronomical writers, in Pliny's later work. Claudius' explanation was interesting to a historian short of material, but not particularly authoritative for the scholar. Nor is it surprising that the one digression preserved by Dio is of a scientific sort, and not antiquarian. He had written the history of Rome from the earliest times, and had no occasion to refer back to the kingly or early republican period as Tacitus does.

However, Pliny is as likely to have included antiquarian digressions as any other. It has long been recognised¹⁰ (though Syme barely considers the question) that one such excursus of Pliny's is quoted at length in the *Histories*. This is the long chapter (iii. 72) in which Tacitus surveys the history of the Capitol. One phrase has attracted particular attention: 'Porsenna

10) E. g. by Fabia, *Les Sources de T.*, p. 246.

dedita urbe' — hardly in accordance with the orthodox patriotic tradition. The only other suggestion of the surrender of Rome is to be found in Pliny (N.H. xxxiv. 139, based on documentary evidence). Syme (pp. 397—8) draws attention to the point, but draws no conclusion. Coincidence, or the use of a common source by Pliny and Tacitus alike, is ruled out by a second parallel. At the end of the same chapter, Tacitus refers to Sulla's failure to dedicate the restored Capitol: 'hoc solum felicitati eius negatum.' Again there is no other reference to this tradition but N. H. vii. 138: 'hoc tamen nempe felicitati suae defuisse confessus est, quod Capitolium non dedicavisset'. If it were not certain that Pliny was a source for the *Histories* (he is quoted by name in chapter 28 of this same book), and probable that he was the common source quoted by all our extant authorities for the year 69, the two references might still be explained away. As it is, it is clear that this, the first of all Tacitus' antiquarian digressions, is derived in part at least from a previous digression¹¹) in the *Histories* of Pliny, due presumably to Pliny's own historical researches¹²).

It is likely that Pliny provided a foundation for certain other digressions in the extant books of the *Histories* of Tacitus. In ii. 3 a discussion of the temple of Aphrodite is introduced, with no better excuse than 'haud fuerit longum'. One detail, of the altar where no rain fell, is mentioned again in N. H. ii. 210. Pliny, the former *contubernalis* of Titus (whose visit to Paphos is the occasion of the excursus), is likely to have anticipated Tacitus in investigating the subject and to have prompted the insertion of a digression hardly relevant to that historian's main theme.

In Hist. iii. 34 a brief historical survey of Cremona occurs, a subject which Pliny, as a Transpadane, must surely have dealt with¹³). But the matter is in no way obscure, and Tacitus himself may still be a Transpadane, despite arguments for Narbonensis¹⁴).

11) It is difficult to imagine that it took the form of a speech.

12) On the strength of the reference to Porsenna, Syme (p. 397—398) refers to 'the scepticism of a powerful intelligence'. Departure from the Livian tradition need not in itself imply an unusual perspicacity on matters of early history; and here it looks as if the scepticism belongs rather to Pliny (or some source of his), who at least gave his authority for his view.

13) So Fabia, o. c., p. 249.

14) Syme, pp. 621—623, 806—807.

For the long excursus on the Jews (v. 2—9), the commentators have pointed out several close parallels between Tacitus' words and passages in Pliny's *Natural Histories*. Again it is probable that Pliny dealt with the subject, presumably at an earlier point in his narrative, at the beginning of the Jewish war. But certainty is impossible¹⁵).

In one of his longest digressions (iv. 83—4), Tacitus declares that the cult of Serapis was 'nondum nostris auctoribus celebrata'. There seems no reason to doubt the assertion; for certainly Pliny's extant work contains nothing concerning the god except two unimportant references to statues (xxxvi. 58, xxxvii, 75). Tacitus' source is evidently Greek¹⁶).

For the *Histories*, then, it may be asserted that in one case Tacitus has adapted a digression which he found in Pliny; that there is a probability that Pliny provided precedent and material for one or two others¹⁷); and that on occasion Tacitus would turn to other sources for digressions which his main historical predecessor did not possess¹⁸).

The *Histories* contained one other excursus of which we know only indirectly. In Ann. xi. 11. 2 Tacitus excuses himself from describing the arguments advanced by Augustus and Claudius respectively for celebrating the Secular Games when they did, on the ground that he has already dealt with the matter adequately in the books 'quibus res imperatoris Domitiani composui'. As quindecimvir and praetor in 88, Tacitus was, as he says, personally concerned with the disagreements between the two previous emperors who celebrated these games. What we do not know is whether he followed the matter up at the time, or kept it by him until, some twenty years later, he came to the problem in his own *Histories*; and then whether

15) At all events, it would be less to the credit of 'the sceptical historian' to have produced this inept farrago from his own research than to have borrowed it from the polymath Pliny.

16) One may suspect Claudius Balbillus, himself prefect of Egypt, interested in soothsaying and in the Flavian dynasty, and probably employed as a minor source by Tacitus (*Hermes*, lxxxviii (1960), pp. 115—117).

17) Hahn (o. c., p. 87), while accepting this conclusion, does not believe that the same thing is true of the *Annals*. Her reasoning is obscure.

18) See also the moralising digression on civil strife in Hist. ii. 37—38, which freely exploits material from the similar passage from Pliny preserved by Plutarch (Otho 9.3). This contains similar references to Sulla, Marius, Pompey, and (explicitly, unlike Tacitus) Caesar, but in a different connection. Tacitus in fact uses Pliny's material to refute Pliny's argument.

he went directly to the *acta* for Claudius' original speech on the subject or to the emperor's discussion 'in historiis' (Suet. Cl. 21. 2), or simply turned up the relevant book of Pliny's *Histories*, which he had certainly had by him for the first five or six books of his work. The latter might be more illuminating, with some opinions other than the emperor's own. But here Tacitus' personal concern in the problem may have prompted wider research than usual. Whichever course he followed (perhaps he did both), this is likely to be the first occasion when Tacitus realised that matter of interest on Roman antiquities was to be found in the learned disquisitions of Claudius, whether in their original form or in the abbreviations of Pliny¹⁹).

Such an interest in the orations of Claudius, during the composition of the *Histories*, might suggest an explanation of the remarkable fact that Tacitus drew on one of these for material to use in his account of Tiberius' reign: as if he were so impressed²⁰) by his perusal either of the *acta* or of the Plinian version of them to make excerpts from some of Claudius' speeches to introduce at convenient places in the later work. Such a procedure is conceivable, and goes some way to explain what too many critics are content to leave as a mystery²¹); yet it hardly accords with what we know of Tacitus, or of ancient methods of historiography. Another hypothesis explains the facts more simply.

The year 27, when the Caelian was ravaged by fire, was dealt with, we may be sure, in the full annalistic record of Aufidius Bassus, continuator of Livy²²) and himself continued by Pliny, presumably with a considerable similarity of scale and manner, and certainly with a tendency to admit digressions of at least the geographical type²³). As Tacitus gives it, the

19) That Pliny had dealt with this topic in detail, and given the material which Suetonius reproduces, is shown by N. H. vii. 159, where he names an actor who appeared in both Augustus' and Claudius' games. The whole section, Suet. Cl. 21.2, may be taken from Pliny.

20) Yet even if he was impressed, he evidently thought very poorly of the speech, as his paraphrase suggests (so Syme, pp. 317—319, 460—461).

21) The solution of Questa (o. c., p. 195), that Tacitus here referred to Claudius' *res Etruscae*, fails to explain the chronological problem.

22) *Mon. Germ. Hist.* xi, pp. 136, 161, Syme, p. 698.

23) Plin. N. H. vi. 27, on the dimensions of Armenia. This will have occurred in connection with the earliest events in that country covered by Aufidius, under Augustus, and so would leave no trace in Tacitus, had he been inclined to vary the *Annals* in this way.

year contains, in six chapters (Ann. iv. 62—67), an account of the collapse of the amphitheatre at Fidenæ (in which the historian devotes more space to describing ‘fundamentis et trabibus’ than he considers proper in xiii. 31. 1); the fire on the Caelian, with the digression (‘haud fuerit absurdum tradere’) on the name of the hill; some abortive prosecutions; and a description of Capri. Dio’s account has perished almost entirely (lviii. 1), and can do nothing to implement our knowledge of foreign affairs or serious public business of any sort during the year. Yet Aufidius must somehow have filled out a considerable number of chapters. A digression on the history of the Caelian would help to make up the quota; and there is no mystery at all as to how Aufidius came to make use of Claudius’ words on this topic. Claudius addressed the senate on the admission of Gauls in the year 48: about this very year Aufidius, who died about 60 (Sen. Epp. 30. 1), must have been composing the earlier books of a work which probably broke off, as a result of the author’s prolonged ill-health (Sen. l. c.) with the events of about the year 43²⁴). If he was a senator, he heard the speech himself; if not, it was still given full publicity, as the extant copy shows. To quote it at length, however little to the purpose of the work as a whole, would be a sensible compliment to the emperor²⁵); although Aufidius may have owed some details to Varro (L. L. v. 46) or other scholars. For Tacitus, less concerned to fill out uneventful years with trivial details and with nothing to gain from reproducing Claudius’ historical views, there was less justification. But at least the appearance of the digression in Annals iv calls for less comment if it was simply taken over from one of the main sources for Tiberius’ reign than if it was painstakingly borrowed from the source for the later period or, more unlikely still, from the *acta* of the later reign. Finally, the detail of the name of the Caelian is not particularly relevant to its original context, and would surely have been omitted in a précis of the speech such as Pliny presumably made under the year 48 (it has, of course, no place in Tacitus’ version); but for Aufidius it would actually be more interesting than the main theme of Claudius’ address.

24) Cf. n. 8.

25) Claudius may have taken at least as much interest in the writings of Aufidius, even if not a consular, as in those of his contemporary Servilius Nonianus (Plin. Epp. i. 13.3).

If Aufidius provided Tacitus with a passage of Claudian scholarship concerning the Caelian, it is likely enough that the same author quoted the contemporary speeches which Syme suggests (p. 709) the same emperor made on the growth of the legal system and on the urban prefecture, as reproduced in Ann. iii. 26—28 and vi. 11. Obviously, not all Aufidius' digressions can have owed matter or language to Claudius: for example, that on the tribunician power (Ann. iii. 56) may well be the result of Aufidius' own research²⁶). Similarly there are digressions in the third hexad of the *Annals* which can most easily be attributed to the investigations of Pliny: in xiii. 29 on the treasury under the earlier emperors (hardly an antiquarian excursus, and well within the scope of the equestrian procurator); in xiii. 50, on imperial taxation, derived probably from a speech delivered in the senate on the actual occasion²⁷); perhaps in xv. 44, on the origin of the Christians, a topic which did not feature in the sources for the 30's, but which would be of more interest by Pliny's time. In the first two of these at least it is possible to find linguistic peculiarities of the sort which Syme elsewhere considers evidence of an unusual source: the phrase 'sors deerrabat' in xiii. 29. 2 (the verb nowhere else in Tacitus, though found in most Silver prose writers, never quite in this sense), and 'sequens ut' in xiii. 50. 2 (for which I can find no parallel, in Tacitus or elsewhere). Neither rarity is likely to be significant. There would be some danger in attributing to Claudius every digression in Tacitus, as Syme seems inclined to do.

Not everyone will be happy at the thought that Tacitus might be so ready to borrow digressions from earlier writers. But it cannot be denied that in other connections he was prepared to admit considerable verbal borrowings from sources which he shared with Suetonius (e. g. i. 6. 5 compared with Tib. 22, vi. 6. 1 with Tib. 67. 1); and the dependence of the digression on Byzantium (xii. 11) on Sallust's *de situ Ponti* is claimed by Syme (p. 730) with no suggestion of criticism. Yet

26) Similarly the history of the Sibylline books (Ann. vi. 12) is patently derived from the senatorial *acta*, with a summary of Tiberius' letter. The last sentence ('igitur tunc quoque notioni quindecimvirum is liber subicitur') shows that neither Aufidius nor Tacitus (himself a member of the college) looked beyond the *acta* for the subsequent ruling of the quindecimviri. This surely throws light on Tacitus' whole attitude to primary documents.

27) See Syme, p. 416, for the conventional language of flattery.

Sallust was far more widely read than Aufidius or Pliny: if there was ever any feeling that such borrowings were reprehensible, these minor annalists would be the more eligible for plagiarism. But plagiarism was clearly not considered a fault in this connection. The most eloquent among Tacitus' known sources both drew on Livy for material for digressions. Fabius Rusticus took from Livy part at least of his (erroneous) description of Britain (Agric. 10. 3); and Cluvius Rufus patently copied from Livy vii. 2 (or from Livy's source, or from some such intermediary as Val. Max. ii. 4. 4) the story of the Etruscan *histriones* who came to Rome in 346 B. C. His passage, quoted with some mistakes by Plutarch (Q. R. 107. 289 D), was presumably part of his account of Nero's performances, with which he was himself concerned (Suet. Nero 21. 2, Dio lxiii. 14. 3), and perhaps appears in an abbreviated form in Tacitus' own digression on the Roman theatre in the context of the Neronia in xiv. 21. 2. And defenders of Tacitus' originality, who are still reluctant to recognise his acceptance of the common conventions of historiography, are left with the dilemma indicated above (n. 15): they must concede either that Tacitus borrowed from the elder Pliny the basis of the digression on the Jews in Hist. v. 2, sq., or that these chapters were the best that his own research could produce. Few will prefer the second alternative.

The conclusion must be that presence of learned digressions in Tacitus cannot without further proof be taken as evidence for his use of original documents. That he did refer to the *acta* for certain purposes cannot be doubted: he certainly did so for a check on the behaviour of Antonia at the time of Germanicus' funeral (Ann. iii. 3. 2), and for some confirmation of the abortive proposal in 65 of a temple to Nero (xv. 74. 3), on which Pliny must have been obscure, over-rhetorical or otherwise unsatisfactory. Further, he probably looked through the accounts of senatorial debates in search of early, and intrinsically insignificant, appearances of characters who subsequently rose to prominence (e. g. A. Vitellius in xiv. 49. 1), but who would hardly be mentioned so prematurely by writers less concerned with the portrayal of character as an important element in history²⁸). And for that part of the *Histories* for which Pliny was not available, or even for debates revealing the indiscretions of men such as Epirus Marcellus and Regulus

28) *Hermes* lxxxix (1961), p. 238.

(Hist. ii. 53, iv. 42), whom Pliny had no interest to provoke, the *acta* would become an unsurpassable, and presumably indispensable source. But for the earlier period he seldom had anything to gain by personally consulting the records²⁹). Most of the material, including speeches, he would find conveniently selected in the appropriate books of his annalistic sources; although these writers might already have transferred some items from one context to another. To reconcile the discrepancies between these and other literary sources for the period would be laborious enough — precisely what the younger Pliny described as ‘*onerosa collatio*’ (Epp. v. 8. 12) — without the obligation of referring to all the available primary documents. To say this is perhaps to deny Tacitus’ initiative in one important respect. His originality is immense, but of another sort.

29) He may have referred to the *acta* in connection with the despatch of Adgandestrius (Ann. ii. 88.1); but if so, he evidently found nothing which was not in the literary sources, here explicitly acknowledged. Likewise in his account of Poppaeus Sabinus and the Pseudo-Drusus (v. 10.5), he probably referred at least to the *acta diurna* for the end of the story, possibly to *commentarii* of Poppaeus himself; 'neque nos originem finemve eius rei ultra comperimus'. Such failures might discourage the most conscientious researcher.