Annals 15 and the Annalistic Tradition:
Structuring History under the Principate

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The place of Tacitus within the surviving corpus of Latin literature is certainly uncontested. However, Tacitus’ writings must be placed within a context of Roman historical structure and practice. Although Tacitus works with the traditional annalistic framework of a Roman historian, he is not confined by the form and adapts it to serve the purposes of his own narrative. This is evident, for example, in Book 15 of Tacitus’ Annals, in which the historian comments on the new realities of the Roman Empire under the reign of Nero. An influential study by Judith Ginsburg in 1981, which partly provides inspiration for this paper, previously examined Tacitus’ adaptation of annalistic structure in Books 1-6 of the Annals. Ginsburg’s central argument is that “although he is fully conversant with the conventions of annalistic history, Tacitus is entirely capable of manipulating them to serve his own ends or of rejecting them altogether.”

She also insists that the claims of previous scholars about Tacitus’ confinement within a previously established literary structure are unfounded: “there is little reason to believe, moreover, that Tacitus found his chosen medium restrictive.” Many of Ginsburg’s observations about Annals 1-6 also apply to Book 15. In this paper, I will describe the fundamental elements of Roman annalistic history and explore how Tacitus adapts the traditional form for his own purposes in Book 15 of the Annals. I will also provide one year, which conforms to the ordinary annalistic structure well, from Livy’s Ab Urbe Condita as a point of reference to compare and contrast with the three years accounted for in Annals 15.
Primary Components of Roman Annalistic History

1. Internal (within Rome) events precede external (foreign) events.
2. Prominent sections detailing religious omens and prodigies.
3. Attention to important domestic events such as the grain supply and fires at Rome.
4. Consular dating – each new year is introduced with the names of that year’s consuls, the chief magistrates of the Roman Republic (the movements of the consuls are also the focus of the external sections of a given year).
5. Year by year narratives within individual books.

Livy 34.55-35.19 as a Template for Annalistic History

The traditional annalistic form, which Livy often maintains faithfully, is apparent for the year 193 B.C. in *Ab Urbe Condita*. The narrative of a given year, according to annalistic tradition, is usually presented in alternation between internal and foreign events. Likewise, as demonstrated by John Rich, Livy’s account of 193 B.C. begins with events at Rome (34.55) before moving on to Spain (35.1) and alternating from there. In any annalistic history, each year is introduced by consular dating, which separates years by the different men who held the consulship. Livy begins 193 B.C. in standard form by indicating “the year in which Lucius Cornelius and Quintus Minucius were consuls” (*quo L. Cornelius Q. Minucius consules fuerunt*, 34.55). The year’s foreign events focus on the movements of the consuls after they are introduced to begin the year. Additionally, the annalistic structure tends to emphasize oddities, such as bad omens or prodigies, which occurred during a given year. Livy includes in his account of 193 B.C. that “earthquakes were announced” (*terrae motus nuntiabantur*, 34.55), “there were great floods in that year” (*aqua ingentes eo anno fuerunt*, 35.9), and that “the Porta Caelimontana was struck by lightning” (*et Porta Caelimontana fulmine icta est*, 35.9), among other strange events. A number of other topics are essential to Roman annalistic structure as well, including the grain supply at Rome, elections of magistrates, the disposition of the provinces and armies, and the deaths and replacements of priests. Livy includes references to
many of these standard subjects in 193 B.C., especially the conditions at Rome. For example, he writes that “the citizenry struggled with debt” (civitas faenore laborabat, 35.7) and that campaigning for elections was very spirited (in exitu iam annus erat, et ambition magis quam unquam alias exarserat consularibus comitibus, 35.10).

Livy’s basic use of the annalistic structure for 193 B.C. is informative for discussion of Tacitus’ alteration of traditional structure in Book 15 of the Annals.

Organization of Internal and External Events in Tacitus’ Annals 15

Tacitus breaks slightly with annalistic tradition to begin Book 15 with foreign affairs in order to emphasize the importance of Corbulo’s campaign in Parthia. This military episode is actually important enough to begin a new book; Book 15 does not start with the beginning of AD 62, but rather introduces new characters and a different phase of Nero’s reign. Tacitus takes the option of organizing some of his material thematically rather than purely annalistically. On a general level, Tacitus’ inclusion of foreign events at the beginning of a book may have served to discomfort the reader and suggest instability by altering expectation. However, by the end of Book 14, Nero’s mother Agrippina has been killed (multisque vulneribus confecta est, 14.8), and no limits to the emperor’s power remain (concessitique vita Burrus, incertum valetudine an veneno, 14.51). The self-centered nature of Nero, which is explored throughout Book 15 of the Annals, can be compared nicely with the actions of Paetus and Corbulo in Parthia. Tacitus implies that a greater interest in personal glory than the greatness of the Roman state is a symptom of the principate when he describes Paetus’ and Corbulo’s reluctance to admit his own failings and to put the state before personal gain. Paetus, according to Tacitus, was said to “confess only with difficulty to Corbulo that the enemy was pressing on” (aegre compulsum ferunt ut instantem Corbuloni fateretur, 15.10). Additionally, “there was no hurry by Corbulo, so that the praise of aid would increase as the dangers swelled” (nec a Corbulone properatum quo glissetibus periculis etiam subsidii laus augeretur, 15.10). Neither Paetus nor Corbulo seem capable of leadership beneficial to Rome as Tacitus presents them here.
Likewise, Nero’s reign grows increasingly dangerous for the state as his personal power increases. Tacitus’ placement of the Parthian campaign at the beginning of Book 15 may serve to foreshadow what is to come. Much of Tacitus’ further adaptation of annalistic structure in Book 15 involves the creation of a character portrait for Nero as well.

**Interpretation of Religious Omens and Prodigies in *Annals* 15**

Tacitus’ extensive discussion of omens and prodigies in *Annals* 15.47 both indicates the historian’s commitment to aspects of the traditional annalistic structure and offer an opportunity to provide further characterization of Nero. This passage, which indicates the end of A.D. 64, conforms to the standard annalistic tradition while adding a wrinkle about Nero’s interpretation of prodigies rather than priests’. Tacitus begins with an ordinary formula: “at the end of the year prodigies announcing impending evils were spread” (*fine anni vulgantur prodigia imminentium malorum nuntia*, 15.47). However, the account of these signs is quickly turned into a judgment of Nero: “the force of lightning strikes was never before more frequent and there was a comet, a sign which was always expiated by Nero with noble blood” (*vis fulgurum non alias crebrior et sidus cometes, sanguine indultri semper Nero ni expiatum*, 15.47). Tacitus cannot let even a simple list of prodigies be noted without a reference to Nero, who is, after all, the main character of this section of his history. The rest of 15.47 includes other oddities that correspond well to the annalistic tradition, including “births of two-headed people and other animals” (*bicipites hominum aliorumve animalium partus*) and “a calf born whose head was on its leg” (*natus vitulus cui caput in crure esset*). The context of Livy’s passages on prodigies does not emphasize the interpretations or actions of one man. Instead, these sections often focus on what the omens might mean for Rome and which priests can accurately assess them. Livy describes some prodigies for 193 B.C. in 35.9: “there were great floods of water in that year and the Tiber overflowed the flat parts of the city; certain buildings around the Porta Flumentana even collapsed and fell and the Porta Caelimontana was struck by lightning” (*Aquae ingentes eo anno fuerunt et Tiberis loca plana urbis inundavit, circa portam Flumentanam etiam collapsa quaedam ruinis sunt et porta Caelimontana...*)
Several other prodigies are also noted in this section, but the most important and traditional aspect of Livy’s account is their resolution. The decemvirs, according to ancient tradition, consulted the Sibyline Books and conducted the recommended sacrifice to cleanse the city (horum prodigiorum causa decemviri libros adire iussi, et novemdale sacrum factum, et supplicatio indicta est atque urbs lustrata, 35.9). Livy’s record of these prodigies and their expiation imply stability of the old religious order of Rome through the Sibyline Books and a positive resolution of crisis. This is in marked contrast to Tacitus, whose prodigies at 15.47 are not resolved but rather emphasized with a certain sense of uneasiness due to the emperor’s negative reactions. Discontinuity with the past seems to be a key theme whenever Tacitus breaks sharply from the annalistic tradition.

**Tacitus’ Discussion of Domestic Events in *Annals* 15**

Tacitus includes information about the grain supply at Rome without halting his narrative at *Annals* 15.18-22 to end his account of A.D. 62. Transitioning seamlessly between various affairs involving Nero, first the victory monuments planned for the end of the war with Parthia and then the emperor’s fear of public unrest, Tacitus incorporates news about the grain supply at Rome. He relates that “Nero, in order to hide his fears of foreign affairs, threw the people’s grain, spoiled by age, into the Tiber, so that he could keep up a sense of security of the supply” (dissimulandis rerum exsternarum curis Nero frumentum plebis vetustate corruptum in Tiberim iecit quo securitatem annonae sustentaret, 15.18). More actions of Nero follow this comment on the grain supply. Rome’s supply of food and other domestic conditions affecting the people are staples of the annalistic structure. Arthur Pomeroy observes this in his discussion of Tacitus’ adaptation of news involving the grain supply in the *Histories*: “[when Tacitus begins his account of A.D. 70 with news about the grain supply] he is turning a traditional entry into a major cause for concern.” However, when Livy writes about domestic conditions such as the grain supply, the events of his previous and following sections usually have no relation to them. In 35.7, Livy goes from a battle description to news about a public debt crisis in Rome and then to events in Spain. The fact that “another care was pressing upon them, that the citizenry
struggled with debt”

(instabat enim cura alia, quod civitas faenore laborabat, 35.7) is resolved within this single chapter and not related to the narrative of 193 B.C. as a whole. This particular use of the annalistic structure was common; adaptations of it are mostly peculiar to Tacitus. Even though Rich argues that “Livy manipulates this [annalistic] framework with a much freer hand than Ginsburg suggests” it still appears that Tacitus breaks from the strict form in Book 15 of the Annals more sharply than Livy does in his account of 193 B.C.

The end of A.D. 63 in Annals 15.32 focuses on miscellaneous actions by the emperor Nero instead of the usual movements of the consuls. Livy’s entire narrative often focuses on the consuls’ actions and “the close of [his] annual report may consist of a variety of items, but its one consistent component is an account of the consular elections.” This main attribute of the ending of the annalistic style’s section on domestic affairs is evidenced in 35.10 of Ab Urbe Condita, in which Livy writes that “it was now the end of the year, and the posturing for consular elections had been more eager than ever before”

(in exitu iam annus erat, et ambitio magis quam umquam alias exarserat consularibus comitiis). The rest of the chapter proceeds to explain the elections and their results. Tacitus, however, does not have any need to discuss elections for magistracies such as the consulship at the end of any year because power truly lies in the hands of only one man, Nero. Annals 15.32 ends the year A.D. 63 exclusively by describing activities by Nero and these actions’ consequences. Tacitus recounts that “in the same year Caesar [Nero] transferred the nations of the Maritime Alps into the ‘right of the Latins’ and put the places of the Roman knights before the people’s seats at the circus”

(Eodem anno Caesar nationes Alpium maritimarum in ius Latii transtulit, equitum Romanorum locos sedilibus plebis anteposuit apud circum, 15.32).

These various items break sharply with the annalistic tradition, which prefers to end a year’s domestic events with news about elections or important prodigies, but demonstrate well the importance of Nero in Tacitus’ narrative. The fact that Nero has the power to conclude diplomatic relations with other nations and to favor particular classes of Romans over others illustrates the degree of power he truly has over Roman society.
Tacitus’ Use of Consular Dating in *Annals* 15

Tacitus begins A.D. 63 in *Annals* 15.23 with customary consular dating, but by using an ablative absolute construction that allows him to emphasize Nero as the subject of the sentence. In contrast to Livy, who implies a certain stability of the Roman constitutional process by his regular listing of consuls to begin each new year, Tacitus chooses “the least specific of all opening formulae . . . which would allow him great flexibility in the selection of material for the beginning of the annual narrative.”

This attention to Nero highlights the role of the princeps and comments on the changing realities of the empire. The ablative absolute in 15.23 (Memmio Regulo et Verginio Rufo consulibus) seems only to be a formality as the rest of the chapter describes the birth of Nero’s daughter and the emperor’s reaction. Judith Ginsburg regards Tacitus’ use of the ablative in this way: “Tacitus employs the ablative construction simply to date the year.” However, Livy, at the beginning of 193 B.C. in 34.55, introduces the year with the consuls’ names and news of earthquakes (principio anni, quo Lucius Cornelius Quintus Minucius consules fuerunt, terrae motus nuntiabantur) and then promptly returns to the consuls at the end of the chapter in the context of lot drawing for command of the provinces (provincias deinde consules prius, tum praetores sortiti. Cornelio Gallia, Minucio Ligures evenerunt). The consuls are too important in Livy’s account to frequently introduce in an ablative absolute construction.

Ginsburg writes that Livy uses the ablative absolute to begin a year 25% of the time (12 out of 48 years) in Books XXI-XLV of *Ab Urbe Condita* while Tacitus uses it 70% of the time (14 out of 20 years) in Annals I-VI. For Tacitus, only the actions of the emperor, even if they are just his receiving a daughter “beyond mortal joy” (natam sibi ex Poppaea filiam Nero ultra mortale gaudium accepit, 15.23), deserve the attention formerly reserved for consuls.

Tacitus adapts the conventions of consular dating again at the beginning of A.D. 64 by confining the consuls in an ablative absolute construction and stressing the emperor’s activities as the main action of the sentence. Even a mundane event such as how “with Gaius Laecanius and Marcus Licinius as consuls, everyday Nero was driven by a desire to frequent the public stages” (Gaio Laecanio Marco Licinio consulibus aciore in dies cupidine adigebatur Nero...
promiscas scaenas frequentandi, 15.33) takes a new precedence because it characterizes the emperor. Ginsburg has shown how Tacitus adapted the annalistic structure in the first hexad of the Annals, including the statement that “there is little reason to believe, moreover, that Tacitus found his chosen medium restrictive.”15 Ginsburg’s observations allow for the complexity of Tacitus’ use of and aberration from the annalistic structure, but stand in opposition to Ronald Syme’s conclusions about Tacitus’ opinion of the traditional form. Syme writes that “the annalistic framework, it might seem, is a primary obstacle: it breaks and disperses a genuine theme or sequence, it juxtaposes unrelated items in mere enumeration . . . Tacitus himself deplores the restriction.”16 However, the importance of Nero in the narrative of Book 15 and Tacitus’ persistent use of the ablative absolute to retain the name of the consuls in this story show that Tacitus was not confined to an old form of writing. Rather, he chose to maintain certain aspects of annalistic structure, such as consular dating and strange portents, in order to comment on how Rome’s political system has changed from one with important elections and magistrates to one that only places emphasis on one individual, the emperor. Nero’s presence in the remaining instances of traditional annalistic form and content demonstrate further how Tacitus uses this form to focus and comment on the princeps.

The consular dating that introduces A.D. 65, particularly important for introducing the Pisonian conspiracy, undercuts the actual consuls by giving way to the true subject of the year in a subordinate clause. Tacitus says that “Silius Nerva and Atticus Vestinus entered into the consulship next, and a conspiracy at the same time began and increased, for which senators, knights, soldiers, and even women had given their names eagerly with a hatred of Nero and favor toward Piso” (Ineunt deinde consulatum Silius Nerva et Atticus Vestinus, coepta simul et aucta coniurazione in quam certatim nomina dederant senatores eques miles, feminae etiam, cum odio Neronis tum favore in C. Pisonem, 15.48). Although the consuls are the subject of the main clause of this sentence, they are not mentioned again in the entire chapter. The conspiracy is clearly the most important event of A.D. 65 that Tacitus plans to write about. Tacitus’ emphasis on information nestled away in subordinate clauses is part of his style as a writer17, but this instance of consular dating also shows the historian’s commitment to the
traditional form for establishing years. In addition to this, Tacitus is
subverting the importance of the consuls again to emphasize a
group of people who may do harm to the emperor. Only the
emperor is prominent enough to merit extensive attention in this
period.

Annual Narrative Form Adapted in *Annals* 15

Tacitus does not conclude Book 15 of the *Annals* with the
end of A.D. 65 as is conventional in the annalistic tradition, but
rather chooses the aftermath of the Pisonian Conspiracy for the
book’s end, to emphasize the conspiracy’s importance to that book.
The close relationship of the conspiracy to the contents of Book 15
is evidenced by its sheer length in the book; Tacitus devotes the
final 27 chapters, or a full 36%, of the book to the Pisonian
Conspiracy and its aftermath. It must have seemed sensible for
Tacitus to end Book 15 after the narrative of the conspiracy was
finished. The historian likely ended this book deliberately because
of thematic considerations as well. If Book 15 begins with Nero’s
power finally consolidated in his own person (with his mother
Agrippina and his childhood advisors, Burrus and Seneca, pushed
aside or killed), then the threat of the conspiracy serves as an
excellent juxtaposition at its end. The plot on Nero’s life not only
presents danger for the emperor at one moment, but also
forebodes what will likely come of Nero. Even with the Pisonian
Conspiracy checked, danger still exists for Nero at the end of Book
15 because the idea of rebellion was already planted within a
significant number of Romans. Tacitus’ final thoughts in the book
provide an uneasy sense of things to come after Nero dedicates the
conspirator Scaevinus’ dagger to Jupiter Vindex: “after the arms of
Julius Vindex it was construed as an auspice and a portent of things
to come” (*post arma Iulii Vindicis ad auspicium et praesagium futurae
ultonis trahebatur*, 15.74). A bleak future for Nero is also implied
after a senator proposes to build a temple to Nero as a god: “but
he [Nero] refused, so that it would not be turned into a bad omen
of his own death by the interpretation of certain people” (*sed ipse
prohibuit, ne interpretatione quorundam ad omen malum sui exitus verteretur*,
15.74). However, Tacitus’ choice to end Book 15 within A.D. 65
does not represent a break with the annalistic tradition but instead
an adaptation that accounts for the author’s use of his thematic
material. This opposes Syme’s assertion that “the annalistic structure is thus dominant throughout the first hexad . . . the third hexad stands in marked contrast . . . the whole treatment is more free and flowing.”¹⁸ The many examples of consular dating, prodigies, and the alternation between internal and external affairs in Book 15 are undoubtedly influenced by the annalistic tradition and, regardless of how the books in the third hexad end, they are not a break from this tradition. Annalistic history involves much more than the mere chronological enumeration of years, as Ginsburg has stated (“scholars, furthermore, have placed too much emphasis on the single criterion, ‘sum in annum referre’”¹⁹). The overall style and content of Book 15 reveals its true relationship to the annalistic tradition.

**Conclusion**

Tacitus’ history writing is complex, simultaneously adhering to the annalistic tradition and breaking from it. A comparison of *Annals* 15 to Livy’s account of 193 B.C. in *Ab Urbe Condita* reveals certain similarities that preclude Tacitus from having abandoned annalistic form. The changes in content and structure found in *Annals* 15 indicate Tacitus’ adaptation of traditional form just as Judith Ginsburg has argued for the first hexad of the *Annals*. Tacitus’ choices reveal an active historian, who comments on the new conditions at Rome through the structure and themes of his history²⁰. In contrast to Livy, who wrote about eras in Roman history that existed with a reliable constitutional system, Tacitus emphasizes the actions of the emperor, Nero, ahead of the movements of the consuls to stress where the power of the Roman state truly lies under the principate. These conscious decisions on the part of Tacitus are what made his work both unique and recognizable to his Roman contemporaries and what sheds light on Tacitus’ own ideas about imperial government.

If one man could have held absolute power and endangered the Roman state during Nero’s reign, that same threat could have been viable in Tacitus’ own time as well. Tacitus, a senator who resented that institution’s weakened role in Roman politics, recognized the danger that absolutism could hold to his aristocratic interests, but his sentiments still hold relevance today. Questions about the role of individual leaders in the governance of
a state were not only crucial to the founders of the United States, but also remain debated in political discourse today. The study of Tacitus and his history, then, becomes a lens for both ancient Roman affairs and our own.
Bibliography


3 Rich (1997) 2 describes the traditional internal-external-internal format for Livy in order to refute its dominance in Livy’s writing.
4 Beck (2007) 262 describes the use of religious events and domestic occurrences by Ennius as the beginning of annalistic history.
5 Beck (2007) 262.
16 Syme (1958) 305.
17 Martin (1981) 221.
18 Syme (1958) 269.
20 For a more complete discussion of Tacitus’ narrative technique in the Neronian books of the Annals, 13-16, see Bartrea (2011).