

## SOME NEGLECTED EVIDENCE ON THE EARLY CAREER OF TACITUS

Dignitatem nostram a Vespasiano inchoatam, a Tito  
auctam, a Domitiano longius provectam non abnuerim.

(Tacitus *Histories* 1.1.4)

Cornelius Tacitus, quem Titus imperator suae praefecit  
bibliothecae, Augusti gesta descripsit atque Domitiani.

(Guglielmo da Pastrengo,  
*De Origine Rerum*, fol. 18)

The first passage quoted above is the only certain evidence we have about Tacitus' early career, until we come to his tenure of the praetorship in A.D. 88.<sup>1</sup> His career before that date has been the subject of much speculation,<sup>2</sup> so it is surprising that no notice has been taken of the second passage. Syme<sup>3</sup> does not even mention it, and C.W. Mendell<sup>4</sup> merely describes it as 'curious'. The reason for its dismissal is presumably that the post of a *bibliothecis* was equestrian, while Tacitus was a senator. Yet in view of our lack of other evidence about his early career, it seems at least worth considering how Pastrengo came to make his statement, even if we conclude he was wrong.

Da Pastrengo lived from A.D. 1290 to 1363, and the work quoted is an encyclopedic list of classical writers, with brief and normally accurate details about them. Among his sources of information was the *Historia Augusta*,<sup>5</sup> and as this includes a reference to Tacitus and libraries the most obvious possibility is that Pastrengo has garbled it. It runs as follows: 'Cornelium Tacitum, scriptorem Historiae Augustae, quod parentem suum eundem diceret, in omnibus bibliothecis conlocari iussit' (*SHA Tacitus* X. 3).

Once we compare this with Pastrengo's passage, the possibility of garbling seems pretty remote: the only similarities are the mention of Tacitus and, in one case, a library, in the other, *all* the libraries. In addition, we can note that Pastrengo's rough idea that the historical works embraced Augustus and Domitian does not come from the *SHA*. It might, though, conceivably come from the only ancient source which gives us this information, Jerome: 'Cornelius Tacitus, qui post Augustum usque ad mortem Domitiani vitas Caesarum triginta voluminibus exaravit' (*Commentary* on Zacchariah 14.1.2).<sup>6</sup> But once again we can note the conspicuous absence of any mention of Titus. There is one very remote possibility of explaining it. Immediately before this, Jerome has mentioned Josephus. We happen to know from Josephus himself<sup>7</sup> that when Titus conquered Jerusalem he handed over some of its sacred books to Josephus. Pastrengo *might* have misunderstood, and thought Josephus was put in charge of the imperial library instead. He may then have come across the Jerome passage, and so misrepresented it that he refers to lives of Augustus and Domitian only, instead of Tiberius to Domitian inclusive. Finally, he confuses

<sup>1</sup> *Ann.* 11.11

<sup>2</sup> For a recent summary, see *RE*

Suppl. XI (1968), 385 ff.

<sup>3</sup> *Tacitus* (1958).

<sup>4</sup> *Tacitus* (1957), p. 237.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. R. Sabbadini, *Le scoperte dei*

*codici latini e greci etc.* (Florence 1905, 1967), I. 4 ff.

<sup>6</sup> In *Corpus Christianorum* (1970), 76A, p. 878.

<sup>7</sup> *Life* 418.

Josephus with Tacitus, and attributes the librarianship to the latter. Thus, by a misunderstanding, a misreporting and a mistake, he produces the statement we have. This whole theory refutes itself by its own extravagance.

Another possibility is that Pastrengo confused Tacitus with Suetonius. After all, the latter wrote lives of each of the Caesars up to Domitian, and was put in charge of a library by the Emperor. But his work started with Julius Caesar, not Augustus; the Emperor was Hadrian, not Titus; the library was the joint Public Library, not the emperor's private one (see below); lastly, the fact that he held this post has only been discovered, through epigraphy, during the last twenty-five years.<sup>8</sup> Was it nevertheless known to Pastrengo, perhaps? His note on Suetonius runs as follows: 'Suetonius Tranquillus Suetonii Leni's filius duodecim primorum Caesarum vitas gesta moresque conscripsit; Traiani et Adriani temporibus agnitus.'

No mention of libraries, whether public or private. Rather, he knows that Suetonius was writing during the reigns of Trajan and Hadrian – not Titus. And lastly, he says that Suetonius wrote lives of 'the first twelve Caesars', though he does not name them; to Tacitus he ascribes 'the deeds of Augustus and Domitian' only. Thus, the only points of similarity between the careers and writings of Tacitus and Suetonius are points of which Pastrengo makes no mention. We may conclude that his information about Tacitus was not derived from a confusion with Suetonius.

Yet another possibility is that Pastrengo invented this post for Tacitus. Renaissance writers were not wholly immune from seeing facts where none existed; this might be an example.<sup>10</sup> But Pastrengo died in 1363, and his work was almost certainly complete by 1350.<sup>11</sup> It is Boccaccio who is commonly supposed to have rediscovered Tacitus in or soon after 1361, and it was this which kindled people's interest in that author, and might have led to invention of facts about him.<sup>12</sup> Pastrengo, whose work precedes Boccaccio's, can hardly be credited with such motives.

It was apparently the remark about the extent of Tacitus' work which led Sabbadini to state boldly that Tacitus was unknown to Pastrengo – that, indeed, this passage 'mostra che non lo conosceva'.<sup>13</sup> But this will not really do. First, Pastrengo gives the name correctly as 'Cornelius Tacitus'; he must have obtained it from somewhere. Second, the description of Tacitus' work as 'Augusti gesta atque Domitiani' is not hopelessly incorrect. Augustus' reign, after all, is dealt with at the beginning of the *Annals* (if only briefly), and the expression quoted is really too brief to show conclusively that Pastrengo thought all the emperors in between were omitted. For that matter, Jerome's reference to Tacitus' 'lives' of the Caesars is much less accurate than Pastrengo's word 'deeds' – though no one has disputed the validity of the rest of Jerome's statement. I attempted to show above that there is no other obvious writer with whom Pastrengo might have confused Tacitus. The name itself must have come

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Syme, *op. cit.*, p. 778.

<sup>9</sup> For this incorrect form of the name of the elder Suetonius, cf. *OCD* s.v. Suetonius.

<sup>10</sup> At a much earlier period we even find 'Cornelius Tacitus in libro facietiarum'.

<sup>11</sup> Sabbadini, *op. cit.*, pp. 5 f.

<sup>12</sup> Boccaccio was in fact preceded in his discovery of Medicean II by Paulinus

Venetus, who died in 1344, but the latter did not write round excitedly to his friends (cf. Heilig, *Wiener Studien* 53 (1935), 95 ff.). G. Billanovich, *I primi umanisti e le tradizioni dei classici latini* (Friburgo, 1953), pp. 30–3, attributes to Zanobi da Strada the removal of the manuscript from Monte Cassino.

<sup>13</sup> Sabbadini I, 8 and II, 254.

from some earlier source, and the most natural conclusion is that Pastrengo derived the rest of his Tacitean information from that same source, including the remark about Titus. Whatever its reliability, could such a source have existed in the fourteenth century? There is a good chance that it could.

Pastrengo's purpose in writing his work was, as he explained it himself, 'animadvertens quod scripturae vetustate consumuntur . . . dignum putavi illustrium illorum et scriptorum suorum nomina scriptis tradere, ne si quo forte casu absumerentur volumina, conditorum tamen et operum non oblitterarent memoriam.' This was no misguided aim. Much of his research was done in the Biblioteca Capitolare at Verona, which was at that time one of the richest and most extensive libraries in Italy. Unfortunately, it started to be dispersed soon afterwards. Some of its manuscripts went to other libraries; others have simply disappeared. Thus, a complete manuscript of Catullus, and another, of Cicero's *Letters to Atticus*, were there in the fourteenth century, but have since been lost without trace.<sup>14</sup> Clearly, lost manuscripts like these should have been available to Pastrengo, and one instance proves that at least one was: he gives us a quotation from Tibullus from a source which is otherwise unknown.<sup>15</sup> It has been disputed whether this quotation comes from a lost manuscript of Tibullus<sup>16</sup> or from a lost Florilegium;<sup>17</sup> whichever it was, it indicates that Pastrengo can preserve information from a source no longer extant.

He obtained the information for his book partly from earlier lists of writers, such as that of Gennadius, and partly from allusions in other classical writers. It is conceivable that he was using such a source here, though we should expect it to have survived in some form or other. But it is also clear that he obtained some information from looking at the title pages of works he came across. We have a good example of this in the case of Rufius Festus, where he has wrongly expanded the abbreviations *v.c.* and *mag.m.* from a codex related to the *Bambergensis*.<sup>18</sup> And Sabbadini's general conclusion, after a detailed examination of the authors named, is 'che il Pastrengo degli autori e noti e non noti da noi elencati aveva per la massima parte conoscenza diretta.' So while a lost encyclopedist may have been the source in this case, I shall briefly examine the possibility of 'conoscenza diretta'.

Pastrengo's mention of the major works only (Augustus to Domitian) is more likely to imply that he had seen a manuscript of these, or part of these, than of the minor works.<sup>19</sup> It is conceivable that a manuscript of the major works was yet one more which existed at Verona at that time, but has since been lost. But there are other possibilities. The First Medicean of Tacitus probably originally contained all the *Annals* and *Histories*, though it is now incomplete, and has been rebound at least once.<sup>20</sup> Pastrengo might have obtained information about it, or, say, the contents of its title-page, in an earlier state.<sup>21</sup> It is more probable that he could have had access to the original of our Second Medicean, which contains the later books of the *Annals* and beginning of the *Histories*. Our present manuscript was copied out at Monte Cassino in about 1100, and the

<sup>14</sup> For a history of the library and its manuscripts, see J.W. Thompson, *The Medieval Libraries* (Chicago, 1939), pp. 146 ff.

<sup>15</sup> i. 7.29-36.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Sabbadini, i. 16 and ii, 256.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Ullman, *CPb* 23 (1928), 172.

<sup>18</sup> Sabbadini, i. 12, n.59.

<sup>19</sup> With other authors, he is most punctilious in listing any minor works he came across, as well as the major ones.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Mendell, p. 239.

<sup>21</sup> He is unlikely to have actually seen it, as it was only brought from Corwey to Italy in 1509.

manuscript from which it was copied is now lost. In *Hist.* 1.1 Tacitus talks both of his career and of his projected writings. It is quite possible that the now lost manuscript at Monte Cassino included, either at the start of the *Histories* or in a marginal note next to this passage, a few more details about his career or the original extent of his works. There are many other possible sources from which Pastrengo might have obtained his information; the three outlined above are the most immediately obvious. At any rate, we cannot object to his statement simply because no other surviving writer gives us the information: in the early 1300s manuscripts and their contents were still being lost — after all, it was this fact which prompted him to write his work — and one of those works might have made the remark we now find in Pastrengo only.

We must now examine whether it is at all possible that Tacitus held the post mentioned. The curatorship of 'the Emperor's library' must be clearly distinguished from that of the public libraries in Rome, whose overseers were entitled either *procurator bibliothecarum* or a *bibliothecis*.<sup>22</sup> The public libraries cannot be in question here, both because Pastrengo refers to it as *suae*, i.e. the Emperor's library, and because he refers to it in the singular, which points equally clearly to the private imperial library. Unfortunately we have very little information about it, or those in charge of it.<sup>23</sup> In Claudius' time, we find two freedmen and two slaves entitled, significantly, a *bibliotheca*, but this title is not thereafter attested. These must have been assistants under a more important man, also called a *bibliotheca*. Mommsen suggested that at some later time this post of Chief Librarian was amalgamated with that of a *studiis*. It is true that the duties were related, though it may be going a bit far to say, 'Die Verwaltung der kaiserlichen Privatbibliothek . . . lässt sich von diesem nicht wohl trennen.' Negative evidence of imperial posts is always doubtful; the duties of the two posts certainly differed, and the two may have remained separate for some time. They may or may not have been combined by the time of Titus.

Does it then make sense to attribute such a post to Tacitus? The *a studiis* and a *bibliothecis* were equestrians, which might suggest that the *a bibliotheca* was also. But we can rule out the possibility that Tacitus had an equestrian career to start with: he was engaged to the daughter of the consul Julius Agricola in 77 (*Agr.* 9.6), and could hardly have been an equestrian at the time. He was born in about A.D. 55,<sup>24</sup> and given that his senatorial career started under Vespasian, we might assign the *latus clavus* and a post in the vigintivirate to this reign. His next post would normally have been as *tribunus laticlavus*, but there were 'a large number of senatorial careers in which no military service appears at all'.<sup>25</sup> Now, by this time, Tacitus had already made a considerable reputation for himself as an orator and barrister.<sup>26</sup> While the *a studiis* and a *bibliothecis* were equestrian, we simply do not know about the Emperor's Chief Librarian. Hirschfeld suggested that for the public libraries in Rome there may have been a *procurator bibliothecarum* at their head, 'während für die einzelnen Bibliotheken Gelehrte als Dirigenten fungiert haben werden'. This may have been true for the Emperor's library also. This had its equestrian

<sup>22</sup> Cf. O. Hirschfeld, *Die kaiserlichen Verwaltungsbeamten*<sup>2</sup> (1905), pp. 299 ff. and H.G. Pflaum, *Les Carrières procuratoriennes équestres* i (1960), 267–8.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Mommsen, *Gesammelte Schriften* vi (1910), 651–2 and *RE*, s.v.

'Bibliotheken' 422–3.

<sup>24</sup> Mendell, p. 4; Syme, p. 63.

<sup>25</sup> E. Birley, *Proc. Brit. Acad.* 39 (1953), 199 f.

<sup>26</sup> Pliny, *Epp.* 7.20.4.

administrative staff, but the man at its head could have been a learned senator: the Emperor may have simply wanted someone with a wide knowledge of literature. If a young and scholarly senator had been offered a chance like this he would surely have jumped at it, not only to curry favour with the Emperor, but also to avail himself of the vast array of documents which were available in the imperial archives, just as they were available later to Suetonius. Indeed, had Tacitus already been collecting materials for his projected historical works, this would have been a splendid opportunity for him. But would he, as a prospective senator, have been offered a job like this?

There are two considerations which help to make this supposed appointment in Titus' reign less surprising. Pliny's remark<sup>27</sup> 'Equidem adulescentulus, cum iam tu gloria famaue floreret' shows that Tacitus had already gained a considerable reputation for his oratory at the Bar when he cannot have been older than twenty-five, i.e. by the time of Titus' reign. But Titus himself had spent some time at the Bar (as well as the bar) in his youth, where his eloquence was considerable.<sup>28</sup> Titus may have recognized a man after his own heart. We also know that the distinctions between senator and equestrian counted much less for Titus: not only did he 'demean' himself by acting as his father's secretary — dealing with official correspondence and drafting edicts, tasks which were certainly normally carried out by the *a studiis* or his colleagues — but more especially 'praefecturam quoque praetori suscepit, numquam ad id tempus nisi ab equite Romano administratam.'<sup>29</sup> Even supposing the librarianship was normally an equestrian position (and that we do not know), Titus clearly did not regard these distinctions of status as so important where jobs were concerned. And of course, had he offered this post to Tacitus, it would have been political suicide for the latter to refuse it.

It might be objected that we apparently have no parallel for a senator taking such a scholarly post. But then, of the senators of the Early Empire who wrote substantial historical works, there is scarcely one whose career is known in detail. Pliny the Younger admittedly had a normal career, though in fact he did not write an extensive historical work. Cluvius Rufus was a senator and historian, yet we know virtually nothing about his early career, save for the curious fact that he acted as Nero's Master of Ceremonies<sup>30</sup> — hardly a very dignified post for a senator, though like the librarianship, it would bring one into close personal contact with the Emperor. Of Cremutius Cordus and Servilius Nonianus we know even less about their early careers. The only senatorial historian to whom we can attribute a normal career is Velleius Paterculus, though even he may have retired early in order to write. Senators who had successful military careers and then wrote memoirs in their retirement (such as Corbulo or Vipstanus Messala) do not really count: they were writing autobiographies, not general histories. Other notable historians either were equestrians (the Elder Pliny, Suetonius) or are not known to have been senators (Aufidius Bassus, Fabius Rusticus, Bruttidius Niger). Statistics, then, can hardly be brought into play to show that an unusual career for Tacitus is unthinkable; rather, we might conclude *a priori* that since he had a normal career later, his literary interests could be expected to show themselves at an earlier stage. Pastrengo tells us that they did.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Suet. *Titus* 4.2; cf. Pliny *N.H. praef.* 11.

<sup>29</sup> Suet. *Titus* 6. *Numquam* did have

one exception: Tac. *Hist.* 4.68, but only in highly exceptional circumstances.

<sup>30</sup> Suet. *Nero* 21.

We could summarize the situation by saying that, in the virtual absence of any specific information about the early career of a senatorial historian, it would be reasonable to assume a normal one. But if evidence suggests that the career involved a scholastic post at one point, we should think hard before dismissing it. In this case the post may have been senatorial, for all we know, and it might have been only part-time, with its holder acting in an advisory capacity. Tacitus might have continued to take court cases, while also advising Titus on the most appropriate acquisitions for his library, or the best way of organizing it.

If we were to accept this new evidence about Tacitus' career — one is tempted to say that 'to deny it could only be ignorance or bigotry'<sup>31</sup> — how does it alter our view of Tacitus the consular historian? At the one extreme we are faced with Mommsen's view that Tacitus is 'the most unmilitary of all writers'.<sup>32</sup> Syme has tended to take the opposite point of view, though he too can find the historian guilty of mistakes, negligence, or even 'an error of the first magnitude'.<sup>33</sup> More recently, Wellesley<sup>34</sup> has also found Tacitus' narration noticeably deficient in certain military matters. It is much easier to explain these deficiencies if we suppose that his earlier career did not include as much experience of the army as most senators had — and that, after all, is what Pastrengo's statement would imply.<sup>35</sup> There is another respect in which this information clarifies Tacitus' attitude to his work. In the first three chapters of the *Agricola* he speaks at length and with great bitterness about the silence which has been forced upon all of them under Domitian's tyranny. This might just be a complaint that he could not publish the *Agricola* and *Germania* earlier, but the complaint seems too denunciatory and strongly worded for that. It reads much better had he been wanting to publish important work for years. Had he been in charge of Titus' library in his mid-twenties, he would doubtless have looked forward to publishing within a few years. Instead, as he points out, 'per quindecim annos, grande mortalis aevi spatium, subit ipsius inertiae dulcedo, et invisa primo desidia postremo amatur.' This reads much better if we adopt the view that once Domitian came to the throne, Tacitus realized he would have no hope of publishing an objective and scholarly work of history during his reign. Instead, he decided to embark on a normal public career, relying on his proven skill and reputation in oratory and the Law. He regretted the necessity for this course of action at the time, and once Domitian died, he started writing again. But his bitterness at the necessity for his earlier decision still shows in the preface to the *Agricola*.

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<sup>31</sup> I quote the words of Syme, concerning another matter: *op. cit.*, p. 188.

<sup>32</sup> *Röm. Gesch.* v (1885), 165.

<sup>33</sup> *Op. cit.*, pp. 170 f.

<sup>34</sup> 'Tacitus as a military historian', in *Tacitus (Studies in Latin Literature and its Influence)* ed. T.A. Dorey (London

1969), pp. 63 ff.

<sup>35</sup> One may also note that Tacitus' post of *quindecimvir sacris faciundis* (*Ann.* 11.11) was normally held by people of considerable scholarship and learning: cf. J. Matthews, *JRS* 63 (1973), 179, n.35.