

OTHO'S FUNNY WALK: TACITUS, *HISTORIES* 1.27*

Histories 1.27 is a puzzling passage for a number of reasons, and has given rise to a variety of interpretations and explanations, which have been further complicated by comparisons with other sources which cover the same episode.¹ As I see it, however, this inconclusive debate has been caused and sustained by one simple fact: modern readers just do not get the joke. The whole passage depends on our understanding of Otho's sense of humour; once this is correctly interpreted, everything else falls into place, enabling connections to be made between this passage and the larger concerns of the *Histories*.

Briefly, the context is this: Galba is still emperor at this point, but not for long: Otho, the most distinguished of Galba's court and the first to support him,² has been plotting behind his back,³ and has secured the support of the Praetorian Guard. In the passage in question, Tacitus begins his account of the day on which Otho begins the revolt, Galba is murdered, and the Senate recognizes Otho as emperor.

Octavo decimo kalendas Februarias sacrificanti pro aede Apollinis Galbae haruspex Umbricius tristia exta et instantis insidias ac domesticum hostem praedicit, audiente Othone (nam proximus adstiterat) idque ut laetum e contrario et suis cogitationibus prosperum interpretante. nec multo post libertus Onomastus nuntiat expectari eum ab architecto et redemptoribus, quae significatio coeuntium iam militum et paratae coniurationis convenerat. Otho, causam digressus requirentibus, cum emi sibi praedia vetustate suspecta eoque prius exploranda finxisset, innixus liberto per Tiberianam domum in Velabrum, inde ad miliarium aureum sub aedem Saturni pergit.⁴

* I am grateful to John Moles, Tony Woodman, Jeremy Paterson, the anonymous *CQ* referee and particularly Jaap Wisse for suggestions and constructive criticisms which have greatly improved this article. All remaining errors are of course my own.

¹ Suetonius (*Otho* 6.2), Plutarch (*Galba* 24.4) and Dio (64.5.3): for a full assessment of their similarities and differences, see P. Fabia, 'La journée du 15 Janvier 69 à Rome', *Revue de Philologie* 36 (1912), 78–129.

² *Hist.* 1.13.4.

³ On conspiracies in Tacitus, see V. E. Pagán, *Conspiracy Narratives in Roman History* (Austin, TX, 2004), who comments, 'Perhaps no other extant Roman historian is as obsessed with conspiracy as Tacitus' (68). In her studies of specific passages, however, she concentrates on the *Annals* rather than the *Histories*.

⁴ 'On 15th January, as Galba was offering a sacrifice in front of the Temple of Apollo, the soothsayer Umbricius pronounced the entrails to be ill-omened, and predicted the imminence of a plot and an enemy within the palace. Otho overheard this (for he was standing very near), and interpreted it in the contrary sense as good and favourable to his plans. A few minutes later, his freedman Onomastus announced that the architect and the builders were waiting for him. This had been arranged as the signal that the troops were now assembling and the plot prepared. Otho, pretending—upon being asked why he was leaving—that he was buying a dilapidated property which had to be surveyed by him first, passed leaning on his freedman through the Palace of Tiberius into the Velabrum, and from there to the Golden Milestone under the Temple of Saturn.' All translations are my own, unless otherwise stated.

I. PROBLEMS

The first noticeable element of the passage is that this is an extraordinarily detailed scene, particularly regarding the time between Otho's departure from the ceremony and his arrival at the rendezvous. Not only the place of sacrifice (the temple of Apollo) and the meeting place (the Golden Milestone) are mentioned, but three other places within Rome, and without any obvious purpose. This map of Otho's route seems at first glance to give unnecessary geographical detail, which is very unusual in Tacitus' historical works. Indeed, if we compare it to Suetonius' account of the same incident, the level of detail seems even more remarkable; Suetonius states (*Otho* 6.2), 'Otho left, as if about to view a house that was for sale; then slipped out and hurried from the back part of the Palace to the meeting' (*quasi venalem domum inspecturus abscessit proripuitque se postica parte Palati ad constitutum*). Although Suetonius has already explained where the rendezvous is to be,⁵ in this passage there is no account of Otho's journey there, much less a description of his route; Plutarch's account also has fewer details than Tacitus'. So Tacitus' inclusion of these details is surprising.⁶

In addition, the details of Otho's route (Figure 1) have posed problems for modern scholars. Chilver⁷ gives a brief assessment of the questions raised by this passage, which are to some extent clouded by the general uncertainty as to the location of the temple of Apollo.⁸ The main problem is that, whichever of the proposed sites of the temple we accept, Otho's route as stated by Tacitus is certainly not the most direct route to his destination;⁹ the journey to the Golden Milestone seems to be unnecessarily circuitous, and no explanation is given for this in the narrative.

⁵ *Otho* 6.2, *praemonitis consciis, ut se in foro sub aede Saturni ad miliarium aureum opperirentur*.

⁶ Plutarch recounts the same incident, with a little more geographical detail than Suetonius (although still less than Tacitus): *εἰπὼν οὖν, ὅτι παλαιὰν ἐωνημένους οἰκίαν βούλεται τὰ ὑποπτα δεῖξαι τοῖς πωληταῖς, ἀπῆλθε, καὶ διὰ τῆς Τιβερίου καλουμένης οἰκίας καταβάς ἐβάδιζεν εἰς ἀγοράν, ὃν χρυσοῦς εἰστήκει κίων, εἰς ὃν αἱ τετμημένας τῆς Ἰταλίας ὁδοὶ πᾶσαι τελευτῶσιν*. 'Saying, therefore, that he had bought an old house and wanted to show things he was suspicious about to the sellers, he went off. Proceeding through what is called the *domus Tiberiana* he came to the Forum, where stands the gilded column at which all the roads that cut across Italy terminate' (*Galba* 24.4: C. Damon [ed. and trs.], *Tacitus, Histories Book I* [Cambridge 2003], 295).

⁷ G. Chilver, *A Historical Commentary on Tacitus' Histories I and II* (Oxford 1979), 88-9, where earlier work on the problems is summarized.

⁸ In fact, this passage is used both by J. H. Bishop, 'Palatine Apollo', *CQ* 6 (1956), 187-92, as evidence to support his contention that the temple was located on the north-east corner of the Palatine, and by O. Richmond, 'Palatine Apollo again', *CQ* 8 (1958), 180-4, as 'one of the most cogent pieces of evidence for the opposite conclusion' (182); Richmond argues in favour of the more popular view, that the temple was on the south-west corner of the hill. Concluding the debate, Bishop, 'Palatine Apollo: a reply to Professor Richmond', *CQ* 11 (1961), 127-8, comments, 'With regard to Tacitus, *Histories* 1.27, I will not press my point. Tacitus' description will fit either site for the temple and, not unnaturally, I shall continue to prefer my interpretation, and Professor Richmond his'.

⁹ It is difficult to determine what Otho's exact route might have been; Richmond (n. 8, 1958), 182, suggests that Otho 'passes the back of the 'house of Livia', and then has the *domus Tiberiana* between him and the temple of Saturn at the north end of the Forum. The Velabrum is the whole valley between Palatine and Capitol, with the vicus Tuscus threading it . . . Otho descends through the original *domus Tiberiana*, which was the seat of administration, into the Velabrum behind the temple of Divus Augustus . . . then by the vicus Tuscus to the temple of Saturn.' Whether we accept this or a slightly different route, the problem is that passing through both the *domus Tiberiana* and the Velabrum does not result in a direct route from the Palatine to the Forum.

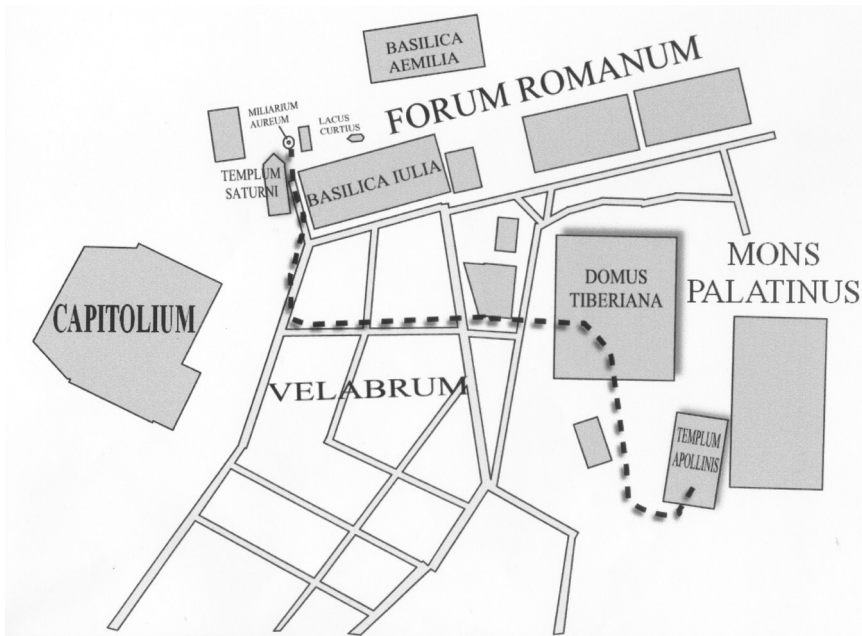


Figure 1.

Another point of contention raised by the passage is the significance of the phrase *innixus liberto*, 'leaning on his freedman'. Damon¹⁰ summarizes the arguments, stating that this is 'a peculiar detail, which has been taken variously as further characterization of Otho as either *mollis* . . . or casual . . . and as an unassimilated remnant of a variant story recorded in Suetonius, that Otho excused his departure with a sudden attack of illness (*O.* 6.3 . . .)'. This is a problem which any interpretation of the passage should address.

One further significant detail is the context of Otho's excuse for leaving. Suetonius and Plutarch both report that Otho had an excuse, but in Suetonius' account Otho does not actually address his excuse directly to another person; he merely leaves 'as if¹¹ going to inspect a house for sale', while Plutarch's Otho gives his excuse unprompted. Tacitus' account, however, presents Otho with a *reason* for giving an excuse: people ask him why he is leaving (*causam digressus requiruntibus*). If we assume that this dialogue is a detail which Tacitus has added¹² to the story, it is not

¹⁰ Damon (n. 6), 157.

¹¹ Or: 'on the grounds that . . .' (*OLD* 5a).

¹² Any speculations about the contents of the 'common source' are in themselves problematic, and I shall try to keep them to a minimum, partly because I believe that any analysis of Tacitus should begin by looking at what he wrote, not by guessing what he changed—my concern here is not with what details Tacitus borrowed from the common source, but rather with how and why he uses particular details in his own account—and partly because, as Murison succinctly puts it, 'Inevitably the main question which arises when we consider these versions of events is: how many separate sources underlie our extant accounts, and who used which? These questions are simply unanswerable' (C. L. Murison, *Suetonius. Galba, Otho, Vitellius* [London, 1992], 81).

difficult to understand why: Tacitus is offering a context in which Otho's lie is prompted by circumstances, rather than being a seemingly spurious remark, as it is in Plutarch.¹³ The question then becomes: why does Tacitus bother to put this excuse in a rational context, instead of omitting it altogether, as Dio does?¹⁴ This is a minor problem, but one that is relevant to my analysis, because it is linked to the other difficulties of the passage.

So this passage poses two major problems: why does Tacitus include so much detail about Otho's uneventful journey from one point to another, and why does Otho take such a circuitous route when (presumably) he is in a hurry? Chilver¹⁵ offers a rationale for Otho's actions, suggesting that 'any difficulties presented by this passage could be answered by supposing that for security reasons Otho was concerned to avoid the most direct route'; this is historically possible, but is not supported by Tacitus' account, and it does not address the question of why Tacitus reports the journey so precisely.

II. SOLUTIONS

Interpretations of this passage are explored in an article by Morgan¹⁶ who argues, concerning Otho's departure from the sacrifice, that 'it is possible to discern in his excuse for leaving a savage joke at the emperor's expense',¹⁷ and I believe that this interpretation of Otho's excuse—as a joke—provides the key to understanding the passage. However, Morgan's explanation of the nature of the joke is problematic. He looks at 'Otho's attested bitterness toward Galba and Piso both before and after their deaths'¹⁸ and is encouraged by this to interpret Otho's reference to a decrepit house as being a reference to Galba's age and infirmity; in support of this interpretation Morgan states that 'he would have found the inspiration for the joke in Philolaches' canticum from the *Mostellaria* (84–156), a canticum in which the young man compares people to houses at each stage in life'. This interpretation has attractive elements—it suggests that Otho is deliberately imitating the dramatic character of a dissolute young man from one of Plautus' comedies, which fits in rather well with Otho's characterization in the *Histories* as an enthusiastic performer;¹⁹ it also contains an element of self-mockery, if Otho is by implication casting himself as a foolish character. Unfortunately, the analogy between Galba and a crumbling property does not work. Otho is about to have Galba murdered, so why would he say that he was *buying* the 'dilapidated property' (*emi sibi praedia vetustate suspecta*)? If he were making a joke at Galba's expense, we might expect him to talk about overseeing the *demolition* of an ancient house, or something similar. We cannot therefore equate the house of Otho's excuse with Galba; however, the idea that this is a 'savage joke' is worth exploring further, and support for a different interpretation of the *praedia vetustate suspecta* can be found elsewhere in the *Histories*.

¹³ Fabia (n. 1), 85, observes this, commenting: 'À lire Suétone et Plutarque, ainsi que Dion, il semble qu' Othon motive spontanément son départ; d'après Tacite, il ne fait que répondre aux questions de ceux qui l'entourent: *Otho, causam digressus requirentibus, cum . . . finxisset . . .* Les deux versions sont également vraisemblables'. However, Fabia offers no explanation for this variation.

¹⁴ 64.5.3 'He hurried off as if on some other errand.'

¹⁵ Chilver (n. 7).

¹⁶ M. G. Morgan, 'The long way round: Tacitus, *Histories* I 27', *Eranos* 92 (1994), 93–101.

¹⁷ Morgan (n. 16), 100.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ See particularly 1.36 and 1.82.

A cumulative case can be made that, in the *Histories*, an emperor's attitude to Rome as a physical and symbolic place is a significant element of his characterization.²⁰ Otho's attitude to Rome elsewhere in the work is certainly relevant to *Histories* 1.27. Later in Book 1, Otho is presented as displaying an inappropriate, even dangerous, disregard and disdain for the buildings of Rome and what they signify. In 1.84.4 he asks his troops, 'Do you believe that the stability of this most beautiful city consists in houses and buildings and heaps of stone? They are dumb inanimate things; it is all the same, whether they fall to pieces or are repaired' (*vos pulcherrimam hanc urbem domibus et tectis et congestu lapidum stare creditis? muta ista et inanima intercidere ac reparari promisca sunt*). The point is rhetorical, in the sense that Otho is trying to calm the soldiers who are rioting in Rome by persuading them that the senators are the spirit of Rome and should be protected, not threatened. However, his casual disregard for the symbolism and history of Rome's buildings is significant, particularly if his speech here is compared to the famous speech of Livy's Camillus against the proposed abandonment of Rome.²¹ Camillus says in Livy 5.52.2, 'We have a city founded with auspice and augury; there is no place in it that is not full of gods and religious rites; for our annual sacrifices the days are not more precisely stated than the places where they may be performed: men of Rome, would you desert all these gods of home and country?'²² Otho, in contrast, not only ignores the significance of Rome and its buildings, as described by Camillus, but also tries to persuade others to ignore it. It is significant that in this passage Otho rejects the idea that Rome is a place where history is not only made, but also recorded in the physical fabric of the city.

Otho is not the only character who is to some extent defined by his relationship to Rome. Each contender for power in the *Histories* has a distinctive attitude towards—or connection with—Rome: Otho and Vitellius both reject the significance of Italy;²³ Galba contributes to the significance of a specific area of Rome, when the site of his death near the Lacus Curtius becomes a symbol to the people;²⁴ finally, it is implied²⁵ that Vespasian will treat Rome with the proper respect and affection. The

²⁰ I argue this case in my forthcoming study of the visual dimension of the *Annals* and the *Histories*. The passage mentioned is the most crucial to an understanding of Otho's attitude to Rome: other relevant passages involving Otho are 1.40, 47, 82, 85, 2.24–5, 32, 41–4, 49.

²¹ Such a comparison is not prompted by any marked linguistic correspondences, so I am inclined to think that while the Camillus passage illustrates the opposing view of Rome, it is not necessarily meant to be evoked here.

²² *urbem auspicio inauguratoque conditam habemus; nullus locus in ea non religionum deorumque est plenus; sacrificiis sollemnibus non dies magis statim quam loca sunt, in quibus fiant. hos omnes deos publicos privatosque, Quirites, deserturi estis?*

²³ Although the effect of Vitellius' rejection is more extreme, because of his troops' familiarity with the land: 2.56.1 'the rest of Italy suffered more gravely and horribly than in war . . . the soldiers themselves, knowing the countryside well, marked down the richest fields and wealthiest houses for plunder, or murder, if anyone offered resistance' (*ceterum Italia gravius atque atrocius quam bello adflictabatur . . . ipsique milites regionum gnari refertos agros, dites dominos in praedam aut, si repugnatum foret, ad excidium destinabant*). It is also important to note that while Vitellius rejects Italy, Otho rejects Rome.

²⁴ 2.55.1 'The populace decked busts of Galba with laurel-leaves and flowers, and carried them around the temples. The garlands were piled up into a sort of tomb near the Lacus Curtius, on the spot which the dying Galba had stained with his blood' (*populus cum lauru ac floribus Galbae imagines circum templa tulit, congestis in modum tumuli coronis iuxta lacum Curtii, quem locum Galba moriens sanguine infecerat*). See also 2.88 and 3.85.

²⁵ 2.78.3 'Whatever it is which you intend, Vespasian, whether it is to build a house or to enlarge your estate, or to increase the number of your slaves, there is granted to you a great habitation, vast lands, and a multitude of men' (*'quidquid est' inquit, 'Vespasiane, quod paras, seu*

relationship between empire and emperor is a gauge of the emperor's suitability for power; Otho and Vitellius are unsuitable emperors because they treat Italy as enemy territory, and in Otho's case because he fails to treat the fabric of Rome with proper reverence.

How, then, does the relationship between Rome and the emperor help us with *Histories* 1.27? The answer, I believe, is that since Otho demonstrates elsewhere that he regards the buildings of Rome as unimportant, it would not be out of character for Otho to be making a snide remark about Rome in this passage. Therefore I would like to suggest that the old and decrepit property which Otho is about to acquire is not an oblique reference to the emperor (whom Otho is about to destroy, not acquire), but a reference to Rome, a property which Otho will indeed acquire within a matter of hours.

The analogy illuminates several aspects of the passage. Most notably, what Otho says (if he is talking about Rome) is borne out by his subsequent actions. We are told that Otho 'pretended that he was buying a dilapidated property which had to be surveyed by him first' (*cum emi sibi praedia vetustate suspecta eoque prius exploranda finxisset* . . .). Immediately afterwards, Otho's route allows him to survey Rome—or at least several areas of Rome—before he gains possession of it a few hours later. Given Otho's attitude towards Rome and general characterization, I believe that we are meant to interpret Otho's remark about the *praedia vetustate suspecta* as a particularly tasteless joke about the value of the city he will soon acquire,²⁶ a joke which only those involved in the plot and the reader are in a position to appreciate, and his rambling walk through Rome, as if surveying a property, confirms this. The *praedia vetustate suspecta* is not Galba, as Morgan argues, but Rome.

A significant benefit of this interpretation is that it explains why Otho chooses a route which takes him through both the Velabrum and the palace of Tiberius, a diversion which has puzzled modern scholars. The detour through the Velabrum is relevant to Otho's view of the situation; as an important centre of commerce, the Velabrum was associated with buying and selling. Otho's use of the word *emi* in reference to the means by which he is acquiring his new property recalls particularly *Hist.* 1.25.1 and 1.23.1, in which Otho bribes soldiers to support him. He has quite literally bought Rome, and the visit to the Velabrum underlines the commercial nature of the transaction. The route through the *domus Tiberiana* is also suggestive; *praedia vetustate suspecta* would be an even more ironic turn of phrase if it referred not just to Rome in general, but more specifically to the home of a former emperor which Otho would soon possess along with the power of an emperor, and Otho's unnecessary visit

domum exstruere seu prolatare agros sive ampliare servitia, datur tibi magna sedes, ingentes termini, multum hominum'). Admittedly, this is only a riddle given by a foreign priest, treated by Tacitus as superstition, and as such is not exactly an indication of future imperial policy, but it does signal a change of attitude towards Rome. Otho, as we have seen, is represented as caring little for Rome as a place, being more interested in the non-physical power structures of the Senate; in contrast, this prophecy suggests that Vespasian will be concerned with building something that will last, and with making a home for himself, treating Rome as his own estate (although it is important to note that Vespasian is not shown in such a positive light throughout the *Histories*; his future building projects will be necessitated to some extent by the destruction of Rome carried out by his own troops). Interestingly, in this prophecy we find a house or property again being used—or at least interpreted—as a metaphor for taking control of Rome, in a similar way to 1.27; although see R. Ash, *Ordering Anarchy: Armies and Leaders in Tacitus' Histories* (London, 1999), 132, who reads 'the construction of a *domus*' as the metaphorical creation of the Flavian dynasty.

²⁶ The empire will indeed 'belong' to Otho; a little later, in 1.29.1, Tacitus tells us that Galba was 'now importuning the gods of another's empire' (*fatigabat alieni iam imperii deos*).

to Tiberius' house suggests that he is fully aware of the significance of his own words. A further detail which makes the description *praedia vetustate suspecta* even more appropriate is that at this time Rome—and particularly the Palatine²⁷—would still have been in a state of disrepair as a result of the widespread destruction caused by the Great Fire five years earlier.²⁸ This is not just a 'savage joke': it also has an element of truth.²⁹

It is also interesting to factor in here a possible pun on *suspecta*, as 'looked up to';³⁰ this would make the *praedia vetustate suspecta* a property 'looked up to because of its age'. This may be another example of Otho's misreading of Rome: he uses the right words, but either he misses the point, or this is yet another joke at Rome's expense. The idea of looking up is picked up later in the *Histories*, in reference to the Capitol, the ultimate *praedia vetustate suspecta*; in 1.40.2 Tacitus comments that 'neither the sight of the Capitol nor the holiness of the overhanging temples . . . frightened them enough to prevent them from committing that crime, the avenger of which is whoever succeeds'.³¹ People are not looking up to Rome—in the literal or the metaphorical sense³²—the way they should be, and this shift in perceptions is a significant element of the *Histories*.

The interpretation of the *praedia* as Rome can also be used, in retrospect, to reinterpret the message brought to Otho by Onomastus, that 'the architect and the builders were waiting for him' (*expectari eum ab architecto et redemptoribus*). This message is a code on several levels. The first level is explained to us by Tacitus—it is a signal 'that the troops were already assembling and the plot prepared' (. . . *quae significatio coeuntium iam militum et paratae coniurationis*³³ *convenerat*). However, by providing both the message and its hidden meaning Tacitus encourages the reader to consider this message as a code to be interpreted, and in doing so he makes available additional readings. Morgan³⁴ summarizes one popular interpretation, explaining that the *redemptores* 'were the praetorian guardsmen whose services he [Onomastus] and his master were hiring, while the singular *architectus*, contrasting as it does with the architects (plural) specified by Plutarch and Suetonius, was Onomastus himself'. It is reasonable to assume that this code, predetermined by Otho and the other conspirators, was not completely arbitrary, but instead was somehow relevant to those involved, so this identification seems convincing. In the light of my interpre-

²⁷ L. Richardson Jr., *A New Topographical Dictionary of Ancient Rome* (Baltimore, 1992), 137, writes: 'On the far side of the Clivus Victoriae was originally the palace of Caligula, which after the fire of Nero was absorbed into the Domus Tiberiana. The palace of Caligula extended the imperial properties to the edge of the Forum and made the Temple of Castor and the Atrium Vestae gateways into the palace . . . Probably the whole palace was thoroughly remodelled at this time, because our sources agree that in the fire the Palatine was almost totally destroyed.'

²⁸ This interpretation is limited, because the fire does not explain *vetustate*, but the implicit description of Rome as *suspecta* should recall the dilapidated condition of the city before its rebuilding by Vespasian. Thanks to Jeremy Paterson for this suggestion.

²⁹ John Moles suggests that it is possible to read Otho's *praedia* comment as a misreading—whether accidental or deliberately sarcastic—of Livy's metaphor of the state as a collapsing building (*Praefatio* 9).

³⁰ OLD, *suspicio* 1a.

³¹ *nec illos Capitolii adspetus et imminentium templorum religio . . . terruere, quo minus facerent scelus, cuius ultor est quisquis successit.*

³² OLD, *suspicio* 2, 'to look up to, admire, esteem'. Note, however, that the perfect participle is rare except in sense 3, 'to regard with mistrust'.

³³ See Pagán (n. 3), 10–14, on *coniuratio* as a significant element of 'the vocabulary of conspiracy'.

³⁴ Morgan (n. 16), 99. In n. 34 he lists the commentators who have discussed this possibility.

tation of Otho's excuse, however, the relevance of the code can be extended. If Rome is being represented as a dilapidated property, about to be acquired by Otho, then the choice of Otho's supporters to cast themselves as builders is surely significant; it suggests that they see themselves—or wish to be seen—as the men responsible for 'rebuilding' Rome. We can take this even further, by examining the term *redemptores*. Damon³⁵ comments that '*redemptor* is a technical term for the purchaser of a public contract', and while the term can cover private contracts, this primary sense of working on behalf of the state strongly suggests that the conspirators are presenting themselves as working for the public good. So while the *praedia* analogy applies most immediately to Rome, it is also extended to include the provision of alternative identities for a whole cast of characters, whose role in the rebuilding is a positive one.

Of course, this supposedly 'positive' identification of the conspirators is likely to be another one of their jokes. This is not a conspiracy with noble intentions, or at least that is not how Tacitus presents it; on the contrary, the troops who are revolting against the almost oppressively moral Galba are characterized by their greed, ambition and immorality. They are not driven by some praiseworthy desire to rebuild Rome, and their self-presentation as such here seems to be a 'savage joke' in a similar vein to Otho's joke about the city.

There is also another level of irony to the conspirators' choice of code-name. Of all the men who came to power in the year that followed the death of Nero, only Vespasian had the opportunity to set up a building programme—certainly no one would describe Otho as a builder. The irony, however, is that the civil war of A.D. 69, the same war that Otho is initiating by his walk to the forum in this passage, was particularly notable for its destruction of the city's buildings; the destruction of the Capitoline temple and its implications is a theme which runs throughout the *Histories*.³⁶ So this episode, and Otho's joke, signals the beginning of the demolition of Rome, not its restoration, which makes the casting of the conspirators as 'builders' ironic from a reader's point of view.

Once we accept the 'joke' interpretation of this passage, it is also possible to identify a number of details in the context which make the joke even more unpleasant. We see Otho standing next to Galba at the sacrifice, and gloating at a prediction which he understands and Galba does not. We see him being fetched by a freedman with the name 'Onomastus'³⁷ which could translate as 'the nominator', the man who bestows fame³⁸—again, nobody around them understands the joke. And the context of the joke, as a reply to someone who asks Otho where he is going, makes it even crueller; this is not an impersonal announcement, but an exchange between two people, one of whom is making fun of the other's ignorance. The use of the verb 'pretend' (*finxisset*, 'had pretended'), also adds to the effect. This is a verb which is used several times in relation to Otho's behaviour; Perkins comments on its use in 1.21: 'Plutarch describes Otho's reactions as open and visible. Tacitus transforms

³⁵ Damon (n. 6), 157.

³⁶ Beginning in 1.2.2, references are made to the Capitol, its significance and the disastrous nature of its destruction in 1.40.2, 1.47, 3.69 and 3.70.2, before the account of its destruction in 3.71–2. Subsequently references to the Capitol are symbolic of disgrace and defeat; see 3.79.1, 3.81.2, 4.54.

³⁷ Onomastus is first mentioned by name in 1.25.1, and is also named in Plutarch's account.

³⁸ See Ash (n. 25), 59, 'Tacitus is often sensitive to the nuances of a name.' For examples of such nuances and plays on names, see A. J. Woodman and R. H. Martin, *The Annals of Tacitus: Book 3* (Cambridge, 1996), 491–3, and A. J. Woodman, *Tacitus Reviewed* (Oxford, 1998), 222, for additional bibliography.

them into an interior monologue and prefaces that monologue with *fingebat*. A single verb informs the reader that Otho's dishonesty is fundamental, his greed overwhelming.³⁹ So *finxisset* here reactivates this image of Otho as a shady character.

If we return to the problems with the passage which I identified earlier, we can see how this interpretation of Otho's excuse addresses them all. It explains Otho's meandering walk through the city, and also the detailed nature of Tacitus' description of the route. It also explains why Tacitus bothers to put the excuse into a realistic context: the excuse is crucial to this interpretation of the passage, and the context of the dialogue draws attention to it by making it a more necessary element of Otho's departure, as well as embedding it in a clearer narrative sequence, and underlining the cruelty of the joke. The only problem that remains is the interpretation of *innixus liberto*, and even there I think this interpretation of Otho's excuse can help us.

Confusion has been caused by this phrase *innixus liberto*, translated as 'leaning on his freedman' or 'arm in arm with his freedman', because commentators are at a loss to explain *why* Otho would be leaning on his freedman. There is a 'widespread assumption that this detail is drawn from Suetonius' variant tale about Otho's alleging fever as his reason for leaving the sacrifice'.⁴⁰ In other words, Tacitus was confused about which version of the story he was using. Assuming that Tacitus is wrong should be the last resort of any interpretation; Tacitus is very specific about the details of this passage, more so than either Suetonius or Plutarch, so it seems likely that this detail suggests more than mere authorial carelessness. Another possible interpretation is that Otho had difficulty walking because he was 'bandy-legged and splay-footed',⁴¹ and needed the support of his freedman. This description of his appearance is given by Suetonius (*Otho* 12.1), and in view of that it seems possible that Otho might have found walking difficult; however, it is important to bear in mind that Tacitus does *not* include any reference to Otho's disabilities in the *Histories*. If this is a detail which Tacitus chooses not to mention, I do not think it likely that he expects his reader to infer it here.

So what *does* Tacitus tell us? He tells us what Otho says, he tells us where Otho goes, and in the phrase *innixus liberto*, he tells us *how* Otho goes. It is not unlikely that these three elements are connected; if what Otho says is a joke about Rome, and the route he travels reinforces that joke, then our interpretation of *innixus liberto* should also fit in with the joke. In case this seems like an over-interpretation of the phrase, it is worth bearing in mind that a person's walk was held to have considerable significance in Roman public life, and consequently in Roman literature. Corbeill, for example, mentions that 'in the *Poenulus*, some pretentious legal advisors are made to justify their calmness by proclaiming that a moderate gait marks a freeborn person, whereas to run about in a hurry bespeaks the slave. In fact the "running slave" appears so often in Roman comedy as to render the expression almost tautological'.⁴² So a person's

³⁹ C. A. Perkins, 'Tacitus on Otho', *Latomus* 52 (1993), 848-55, at 851.

⁴⁰ Morgan (n. 16), 99.

⁴¹ Murison (n. 12), 105, speculates on how different versions of the story came to be told, and suggests that Otho 'began to trip over his feet as he made his way through the *domus Tiberiana* and that, as his excitement got the better of him, Onomastus took him by the arm both to restrain him and prevent him from tripping up . . . Onomastus may have explained Otho's high colour and uncertain gait to those they passed as an attack of fever'. This is an interesting interpretation, but implausible—if everyone knew that Otho had difficulty walking, why would his freedman need to explain or excuse it? Otho's excuse does not apply to his manner of walking, but rather to his early departure from the sacrifice.

⁴² A. Corbeill, 'Political movement: walking and ideology in Republican Rome', in *The Roman Gaze: Vision, Power and the Body*, ed. D. Fredrick (Baltimore, 2002), 191.

manner of walking, and particularly that of a person in the public eye, was something that would be noticed both by observers and by readers. It is surely significant that the characters cited by Heubner as walking in a similar way include Suetonius' Nero, Cicero's Verres, and later Caracalla, as portrayed in the *Historia Augusta*—not exactly the most respectable bunch. To explain Otho's manner of walking, I suggest that Morgan's interpretation is on the right track; following Heubner,⁴³ he argues that 'Otho's aim in taking his freedman's arm was to convey a relaxed and casual air, precisely the impression he created by a leisurely walk down to the golden milestone'.⁴⁴ This seems plausible as far as it goes, but I would like to take it one step further, and suggest that this is a visual manifestation of Otho's humour, as he strolls about the city as if sightseeing—or surveying a property. Not only Otho's route but even his manner of walking displays his irreverent attitude towards the city of Rome, as he sets off slowly through the property he is about to buy, which 'must first be explored' (*prius exploranda*).⁴⁵

The notion of a dilapidated *praedia* obtained by Otho could also lend itself to another interpretation; instead of the *praedia* as the city of Rome, we could read it as a metaphor for the imperial *domus*, the household or dynasty of the emperors, currently represented by the elderly Galba. This would add an interesting connotation to the route through the *domus Tiberiana*; by walking through the house of Tiberius after declaring his intention to restore the imperial 'house', perhaps Otho is suggesting that he intends to become another Tiberius. His subtlety and sarcasm here are indeed worthy of Tiberius.

This interpretation has some merit, but also significant drawbacks. It is important to note that Tacitus does not use the word *domus* in reporting Otho's excuse, even though Suetonius does. He uses *praedia* instead, a word with a very different range of meanings; *praedia* is used of land, estates or a plot given as a guarantee, and would not readily yield the same abstract interpretation as *domus*. This word choice could be attributed to a desire for *variatio*; Tacitus does use *domus* in the account of Otho's route through the *domus Tiberiana*. However, his avoidance of such a potentially loaded term in the context of Otho's excuse argues against the imperial *domus* interpretation. More importantly, the interpretation takes the humour, black though it is, out of the joke. It is Otho's words, followed by his actions, that create the joke; if the words refer to an abstract concept instead of a physical place, Otho's route loses much of its relevance, and the joke is less effective. *Praedia* does not translate as 'house', with all that that implies, and we should not be misled by Suetonius' *domus* or Plutarch's *οἰκία* into twisting its meaning.

The interpretation for which this article argues explains Tacitus' use of apparently superfluous detail in this scene, and adds an extra layer of subversive subtlety which is consistent with Tacitus' style in the *Histories*, as well as contributing to the characterization of Otho. It is important to note, however, that this interpretation is primarily literary, not historical; what it proposes is that Tacitus constructs the narrative in such

⁴³ H. Heubner, *P. Cornelius Tacitus, Die Historien Band I: Erstes Buch* (Heidelberg, 1963), 68, 'Der Ausdruck bedeutet also nicht, daß Otho den Kranken spielte (dagegen *ann.* 2,29,2 *simulato morbo*), sondern einfach, daß er, um die Harmlosigkeit seines Weggehens sinnfällig zu machen, den Arm um die Schulter des Freigelassenen legte und sich in dieser legeren Haltung zum Gehen wandte.'

⁴⁴ Morgan (n. 16), 99, citing also Heubner's parallel with Suet. *Nero* 43.2.

⁴⁵ It may also be relevant to note that *innixus* does not necessarily denote only literal 'leaning'; it can also mean 'depending on', a possible pun since in this situation Otho is represented as depending greatly upon the resourcefulness of his freedman.

a way that he both dramatizes the black humour of the scene and suggests that Otho himself is responsible for, and conscious of, the irony of the excuse and the route. It is not necessarily the case that Tacitus' description of Otho's journey to the rendezvous is accurate, but as a literary episode it works effectively; by making the *character* of Otho wander around his *praedia* before he takes possession of it Tacitus gives the scene an ironic twist.

Because this interpretation focuses on Otho as a character rather than a historical figure, it does not completely exclude the explanation that the circuitous route was in reality an attempt to convince any observers of the veracity of Otho's excuse,⁴⁶ or chosen 'for security reasons',⁴⁷ or any other logistical analysis, since it leaves open the question of whether there really was a joke, and if so, whether it was prompted by a route Otho had already chosen for more practical reasons. However, while these other interpretations have a certain limited appeal, this is the only one which presents *Histories* 1.27 as a coherent scene and which addresses simultaneously all of the problematic elements of the passage. Tacitus strengthens the thematic importance of the connection between Rome and the emperor, and portrays Otho as devious and satirical, by making minor but telling changes to the events as reported by Suetonius and Plutarch. Morgan has already reached the conclusion that 1.27 is 'far more subtle than scholars have been willing to concede';⁴⁸ what I would like to add is: so is Tacitus' Otho.

Newcastle University

CORA BETH FRASER
corabethf@aol.com

⁴⁶ Morgan (n. 16), 95.

⁴⁷ Chilver (n. 7), 89.

⁴⁸ Morgan (n. 16), 101.