

THE STRUCTURE OF TACITUS' *ANNALS*

Three Hexads or Two 'Ogdoads'?

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1. Introduction

I hope it will not be too obvious in what I have to say today that I'm not really a Tacitus scholar or an ancient historian. I mostly do textual criticism and Latin verse, especially Propertius, Ovid, Senecan Tragedy, and Juvenal. However, as with my theory about the *Prometheus Bound*, which I am presenting in London on Wednesday, I feel that I have stumbled across an idea outside of my own particular specialty that is interesting enough to demand treatment, and I am going to hang onto it, even if I am not the most qualified person to treat it.

What I am presenting today is a hypothesis on the structure of Tacitus' *Annals*, a hypothesis that has two sides to it. The negative part, in which I refute Sir Ronald Syme's analysis of the structure, is a lot easier than the positive part, in which I present my own. The latter will take a few years to prove, if it can be proved at all.

2. The Problem: How Many Books, and How Divided?

Like the larger works of all the other major Roman historians, the *Annals* and *Histories* of Tacitus survive only in part. One of the main joys of working on fragmentary authors is reconstructing the missing parts. In Tacitus' case, we can do this with a fair amount of freedom: we need not fear that new discoveries at Piso's Villa or other sites in Herculaneum will prove us wrong, since Tacitus' works had not of course been written when Vesuvius erupted. This is a factor that is sometimes forgotten. Every year or so on the internet Classics list there is a discussion of what lost works of Classical literature we would most like to turn up at Herculaneum. There's always someone who proposes the

lost books of Tacitus, which is a compliment to his taste, if an insult to his knowledge of chronology.

In one of his Biblical commentaries, Jerome tells us that Tacitus' historical works totaled thirty books. This is the first quotation on your handouts:

Cornelius Tacitus, qui post Augustum usque ad mortem Domitiani uitas
Caesarum triginta uoluminibus exarauit.

Jerome's number is obviously about right, though he is far from infallible. For instance, he is demonstrably wrong about the date of Catullus' death, and his dates for Lucretius are also generally rejected. Nevertheless, Tacitus scholars are probably right in assuming that Jerome's number is correct, and that his thirty books included the *Annals* and the *Histories*, but not the smaller works. The problem is to divide these thirty books between the two works, allowing at least 16 for the *Annals*, since we have part of Book XVI, and at the same time allowing a sufficient number after Book V of the *Histories* to cover the entire Flavian dynasty. Scholars have generally assumed that there were either 18 books of *Annals* and 12 of *Histories* or 16 of *Annals* and 14 of *Histories*. It is conceivable, though unlikely, that there were 16 of *Annals* and 12 of *Histories*, with *Agricola* and *Germania* making up Jerome's total of thirty: they could pass for works of history, as the *Dialogus* could not. However, Jerome's words will not easily bear such a construction, and we seem to be left with a choice of 16 and 14 or 18 and 12. It is also conceivable that each work contained an odd number of books, and that the numbers were seventeen and thirteen. I will return to this last point below.

The better Roman historians seem to have taken as much care as Roman poets over the arrangement of their works. No one would dispute this statement when it comes to the small- and mid-scale structure, the arrangement of material within each paragraph and within each single book, but I believe that it is also true of the large-scale structure, the distribution of the material by books and by groups of books. Given the state of our evidence, this statement is necessarily a bit dogmatic, since none of the multi-roll works of Roman history survives complete, and most are not even close. Nevertheless, Livy certainly started out constructing his history in blocks of five and ten books, though the pentadic structure seems to have broken down towards the end. We would expect that

Tacitus arranged his own work in some equally significant, but perhaps far more devious, way.

Why should we care how Tacitus divides up his work? Because, at least for the better ancient historians, the overall shape of the work carries quite a lot of the meaning. To take some obvious examples: The gradual expansion in scale of Livy's history from book to book and decade to decade mirrors the expansion of Rome. Herodotus sets up for his account of the showdown between east and west by 'blocking out' all the quarters of the known world to give the fullest possible context, while filling in all the pertinent antecedent history. If Hunter Rawlings III is correct, Thucydides made (or planned to make) the two halves of the Peloponnesian War follow a parallel pattern, with the Melian Dialogue matched by the Spartan debate over whether to destroy Athens at the end of the war. I believe it was his book that gave me the first kernel of the idea for this lecture.

3. The Shape of the *Histories*

If we ask what was the original 'shape' of Tacitus' *Annals* on the largest scale, it is not easy to say. However, before turning to that, I want to say a few words about the shape of Tacitus' *Histories*. It may seem quixotic to try to determine the structure of the *Histories* first. Whether there were 12 or 14 books to begin with, we have only the first four and something like one-quarter of the fifth (26 chapters). Virtually nothing survives of the reigns of Titus and Domitian, which would have covered at least half of the whole. All we know is that Tacitus devoted Books I-III to Galba, Otho, and Vitellius, Book IV and what survives of Book V to Vespasian, beginning his work on January 1st of the year 69, and therefore including only the last two weeks of Galba's reign. Whether Vespasian was given three or four books, Titus one or two, and Domitian five, six, or seven, cannot be determined, though that has not prevented Syme from laying out in detail his own idea of what would have been included in each book.

However, paradoxically, the structure of the *Histories* at its highest level is easier to discern than that of the *Annals*. Once Tacitus had picked his boundaries, the shape would have imposed itself: they must have formed an arc or parabola, as it were, from the anarchy of 69 A.D. through a brief period of good government (Titus) to the monolithic

tyranny of Domitian's last years. This fits very well with Tacitus' statement that Vespasian was the only emperor who got better as he went along. Beginning his work in the last days of Galba, the historian proceeds through the short and sordid reigns of Otho and Vitellius, goes on to early Vespasian, not as bad as civil war, then late Vespasian, even better, then Titus, best of all, as a short summer of prosperity and hope. The emperor's youth would promise much more, though there would be hints of possible disaster in his evil brother, waiting in the wings, as indeed there are in the extant portions. The sudden and premature death of Titus would provide a dramatic *peripeteia* at or near the center of the work, to be followed by early Domitian, bad, and late Domitian, worse and then even worse than that. The eruption of Vesuvius in Titus' reign might have provided an appropriate omen of coming doom, a prodigy to end all prodigies, so impressive even in Pliny's version that we are almost not sorry not to have Tacitus'.

So much for the shape of the *Histories*. In the *Annals*, any such upward or downward arc is hard to see: Tiberius, Claudius, and Nero are all so variously awful that we seem to be offered an assortment of very different but equally horrible men, and it is unlikely, to say the least, that Gaius would have been any sort of exception.

4. The 'Ogdoad' Theory

This brings us to my 'ogdoad' theory. I gave an earlier version of this part of my paper, with the same title, at the annual meeting of CAMWS, the Classical Association of the Midwest and South, in Nashville in 1996. It was posted on my website for a while, but I removed it a month or two ago to make this fresher. I will put at least the short version back up as soon as I get home at the end of next week. When I first gave the short version of this paper at the University of Alabama, it was called "Old Paranoids and Young Maniacs", and I had to assure my then-colleagues (not entirely accurately) that my title was not intended to refer in any way to any member of the Department of Romance Languages and Classics. So, here is my lecture-within-a-lecture:

Two opinions are current on the structure of the *Annals*:

In chapter xxi and Appendix 35 of his book *Tacitus*, Ronald Syme (not yet Sir Ronald) argued that there were originally 18 books, divided into ‘hexads’ or groups of six, with the six books on Tiberius forming the first hexad, two on Gaius plus four on Claudius forming the second, and six on Nero forming the third. (Syme’s analysis is illustrated on page 2 of your handouts: the gray shading represents extant portions.) That would leave 12 books for the *Histories*, and Syme divides these into two more hexads, with six books for Galba, Otho, Vitellius, and Vespasian, and six more for Titus and Domitian. Besides overall neatness, one advantage of Syme’s scheme is that the last two years of Nero’s reign, after our text breaks off in the middle of Book 16, were full of exciting and important events. It would have been difficult to squeeze them all into half a book. All the more so, if the *Annals* continued on past Nero’s death to cover the second half of the year 68, so as to link up with the beginning of the *Histories*. On the other hand, even if it did, two and a half books for two and a half years seems excessive. (I will return to this point.) One obvious disadvantage of the hexad theory, which Syme rather glosses over, is that Gaius and Claudius make quite a disparate pair. In general, Syme seems much less interested in his second hexad than the first and third, no doubt partly because not so much of it survives.

The second current opinion on the structure of the *Annals* is less positive, and needs no diagram to illustrate it. Against Syme, others, such as F. R. D. Goodyear in his unfinished commentary on the Tiberius books of the *Annals*, argue that there were 16 books, not 18, and do not worry much about any grand structure, or at least any structure larger than the division by emperors. One advantage to this position is that our only actual evidence supports a total of 16 books for the *Annals*. The archetype of the *Histories* numbers the surviving books as if they were books 17 through 21 of the *Annals*. If we then go back to Syme’s alternative hypothesis, that Tacitus intended to write 18 books of *Annals*, but only lived to finish 16, that still leaves 14 books for the *Histories*, which means that we cannot have hexads in both works.

I would like to propose a third possibility, which combines the advantages of the other two. I suggest that Tacitus wrote 16 books of *Annals* (thus Goodyear), with a neat and clear structure of blocks of books (thus Syme), consisting not of three ‘hexads’ but of

two ‘ogdoads’ or groups of eight. (As awkward as it sounds in English, the word ‘ogdoad’ has a good Greek pedigree: it is for the most part Neoplatonic, like ‘ennead’.) The first ogdoad would consist of six books for Tiberius plus two for Gaius, the second of four each for Claudius and Nero. My analysis is depicted on page 3 of your handouts.

The principal difficulty in proving — or for that matter disproving — my analysis of the structure of the *Annals* is that there are so few corresponding parts available. What I mean is this. If, as Syme argued, Tacitus wrote three hexads, then we have the beginning and end of the first, and most of what comes in between, the end of the second, and the beginning of the third. That is a good deal to work with. If, as I think, he wrote two ogdoads, we have the beginning but not the end of the first, and neither beginning nor end of the second, though we do have more than half of what comes in between.

My basic hypothesis is simple, though I will add some complications later on in this paper. I suggest that the four emperors covered in Tacitus’ *Annals* are best taken in two pairs, in interlocking order, with Tiberius corresponding to Claudius and Gaius to Nero. The similarities between Tiberius and Claudius are quite striking, as are those between Gaius and Nero.

To begin with, Tiberius and Claudius were old men, Gaius and Nero very young: over-fifties and under-thirties, to simplify only very slightly. (The significant dates are on page 4 of your handouts.) In each case, the older man was succeeded by his great-nephew, who was also his adopted son — rather like Julius and Augustus, as it happens, though there it was the younger one who ended up as an old paranoid. Each of the older pair became emperor by default, because no one else was available, Tiberius adopted after all of Augustus’ other heirs had died, Claudius hauled out from behind a curtain by the Praetorians after the murder of Gaius. Each of the older pair had spent years disregarded and despised, when it was assumed that he would never inherit, Tiberius sulking on Rhodes, Claudius drooling in his study. Each of the younger pair came to power more or less legitimately, according to his own expectations and the plans of his predecessor — as of course Tiberius did, in the long run. Each was paired with an even younger and more directly legitimate heir, Tiberius Gemellus and Britannicus, whom he very soon disposed of. Tiberius and Claudius were both murdered (if they were

murdered) in domestic plots, by smothering or poisoning. Their successors were overthrown openly, Gaius stabbed to death in a coup d'état, Nero committing suicide after whole provinces had revolted against him and inaugurated a civil war that continued for a year after his death.

Tiberius and Claudius shared military skills or (in the latter case) military interests, which Gaius and Nero despised. We might contrast Tiberius' many battles (before his accession) and Claudius' (vicarious) conquest of Britain with Gaius' seashell-gathering expedition. Tiberius and Claudius also had pretensions to republicanism. Each made a show of his supposed reluctance to rule and eagerness to share his burden with the Senate. Gaius and Nero were open practitioners of oriental despotism, demanding to be worshipped as gods, a demand which in each case led to a Jewish revolt. Tiberius and Claudius had pedantic and old-fashioned literary tastes, while Nero at least (if not Gaius) was thoroughly avant-garde.

Both Gaius and Nero were accused of incest, Gaius with all three of his sisters, Nero with his mother. Tiberius spent much of his reign 'out of town', while Claudius was 'out to lunch' during his. Each of this older pair allowed someone else (Sejanus and Agrippina) to run the empire while he was off on Capreae or in a stupor, as the case may be, and in each case the trusted lieutenant tried to take over much more power than had been granted, and was murdered for it, with the help of more trustworthy henchmen. By contrast, the governments of Gaius and Nero were far too 'hands-on' for most people's liking — or safety. (Agrippina, of course, was not disposed of until she had succeeded in changing the succession, and then overreached herself in dealing with her son. That is the main reason Claudius only gets four books as against Tiberius' six.)

Tiberius and Claudius were frugal, Gaius and Nero extravagant. Each of the latter left the empire leaderless as well as bankrupt, with two days of anarchy (no emperor at all) following the assassination of Gaius, and a full year of bloody chaos (no fewer than four emperors) following the death of Nero. In my view, the (missing) transition between books 8 and 9, after the assassination of Gaius, when the Republic had been in effect restored by default, would have been the high point and the central turning-point of the *Annals*, as the Senate, handed power on a platter, showed itself totally incapable of ruling

Rome or even selecting a decent emperor, or any emperor at all — they dithered until the decision was taken out of their hands. As Tacitus describes a similar situation in Armenia (*Ann.* 2.4), Rome was then ‘more without a master than in a state of freedom’, *magis sine domino quam in libertate*.

5. Evidence

At this point, having taken up so much of my allotted time in showing that Tacitus should have written his *Annals* in this way, we need to ask whether he did so, and that is a much more difficult question to answer. To prove my case will take a substantial monograph, if it can be done at all. Four small hints may suffice here:

1. First, as Goodyear notes, Tacitus appears to group the emperors in pairs when he first names them in announcing his subject (*A.* 1.1.2): *Tiberii Gaique et Claudii ac Neronis*. (It seems typically Tacitean to use three different conjunctions.)

2. Second, Syme divides his hexads into three-book halves, ‘triads’, I suppose, though it only really works for the first, where Sejanus is ostentatiously introduced at the beginning of Book 4. However, Tacitus’ obituary of Tiberius (6.51.3, quoted on page 1 of your handouts) does not divide his reign into 3 + 3 books, but very nearly into 3 + 1 + 1 + 1. (Since Germanicus dies at the end of Book 2 and Drusus very early in Book 4, their restraining influence is pretty much restricted to the first three books. Tiberius’ mother dies at the beginning of Book 5, and Sejanus almost certainly either at the end of 5 or the beginning of 6, though the passage does not survive.) If we can lump together Book 6 (on Tiberius’ open depravity and cruelty) with the lost Books 7 and 8 (on Gaius’ similar habits), this will make a scheme of 3 + 1 + 1 + 3 books, which closely matches the second ogdoad, where there are 3 books for Claudius alone, 1 for Claudius under the thumb of Agrippina, 1 for Nero still tied to his mother’s apron-strings, and 3 for Nero alone after he kills her — assuming, of course, a total of 16 books. In other words, the middle two books of the first ogdoad (books 4 and 5) are devoted to Sejanus, while the middle two books of the second (12 and 13) are devoted to Agrippina, as illustrated on my handout.

3. My third point is closely related to the second. There are some strong breaks between books, and these give valuable clues. Indeed, if the entire text survived, I doubt there would be any dispute about the structure of the work. Again, that is part of the charm of studying fragmentary works. (I will be making a similar claim on Wednesday, that if the entire Prometheus trilogy attributed to Aeschylus survived, there would be no doubt about the interpretation, and everyone would know that I am right and they are wrong.) As I have mentioned, Syme would like to divide his hexads into halves, and this works well enough for the first hexad, but he admits that there is no break between books XV and XVI. My theory predicts strong breaks after books 3, 5, 11, and 13, as well as at the ends of reigns, of course, but not at the end of 15, and this suits the evidence much better. After Book III, we have the introduction of Sejanus: this fits equally well with my ogdoads and Syme's hexads. The fall of Sejanus, far more spectacular than his rise, must have come at the end of Book V or the beginning of VI, though the passage is not extant. This is a break that my theory predicts, and Syme's does not. My theory also predicts (or perhaps I should say explains) strong breaks between XI and XII, where we find the death of Messallina and the marriage to Agrippina, and between XIII and XIV, where we find the murder of Agrippina. According to Syme, these would separate off the last book of the second hexad and the first book of the third, and both of these separations tend to obscure his division into triads. Finally, the second hexad, which, as I have said, does not seem to interest Syme, cannot possibly be divided into triads, since the primary division is surely that which separates Books VII and VIII, on Gaius, from books IX-XII, on Claudius.

4. The fourth advantage of my theory is the near equality of the total years covered in each ogdoad. Although the individual books of the *Annals* cover a highly disparate number of years (anywhere from less than 2 to 7 in those that survive), the first ogdoad (Tiberius plus Gaius) would have covered 26 years and 5 months in all, the second (Claudius plus Nero) 27 years and 4 1/2 months: a difference of just under a year or (more scientifically) less than 4%. With Syme's hexads, we would have 22 3/4 years for the first, 17 1/2 for the second, and 13 2/3 for the third. Of course, Livy and Ammianus Marcellinus expanded their coverage enormously as they went along, but they had much longer periods to cover and a lot less available information about the earlier parts. I see

no reason to think that Tacitus did the same, except for the fact that the *Histories* are more expansive, around two years per book. Someone might argue that the *Annals* slow down at the end to get ready to link up with the *Histories*. Anyway, if we assume 16 books for the *Annals*, we find that the number of books is roughly proportional to the number of years covered. Not only does the sum of years and books for Tiberius plus Gaius equal or roughly equal those for Claudius plus Nero, but Claudius' reign and Nero's reign were of very nearly the same length, and fill the same number of books according to my scheme but not Syme's.

Gaius still gets more than his share of the first ogdoad, 25% of the books for only about 15% of the days and years. But this is what we would expect. His reign was filled with interesting events, while not much happened during long stretches of Tiberius'. It also seems that each individual emperor requires a certain minimum number of pages to cover his character and idiosyncrasies. That is why Galba, Otho, and Vitellius get such a disproportionate share of the *Histories*.

The four small pieces of evidence I have just given are not much to go on. Further arguments will require careful comparison of the extant parts of the *Annals* to show how Tacitus has shaped his story to fit the scheme I have outlined. In doing so, it will, of course, be very difficult to avoid circular argumentation. It will not be easy to prove that Tacitus has reshaped or deformed the history of the Julio-Claudians to fit a predetermined pattern when so much of the history of the period is preserved only in his version.

6. Clarification: Three Ways to Divide the *Annals*

So much for my Nashville lecture, which I deliberately made as provocative as possible. I would now like to modify some of what I have said, or rather set it in a larger context. Rather than hexads or ogdoads, it might be most reasonable to divide the *Annals* into four unequal parts, one for each emperor. Any work in four parts can, like Vergil's *Georgics*, be interestingly divided up in various ways. Each part will obviously have some unique characteristics, so comparing any one to the other three parts tells us

nothing about the overall structure. But it really gets interesting when we divide the parts up in pairs. This can be done three ways:

1. First, we can compare the first two to the last two, **Early versus Late**, as it were, pitting Tiberius and Gaius against Claudius and Nero. The break in the succession after Gaius' murder makes this an eminently reasonable division.

2. Second, we can put the first and last in one category, and the two in between in another: **Outer versus Inner**, as it were, pitting Tiberius and Nero against Gaius and Claudius. This is just about the simplest case of ring composition. It is also not incompatible with the first pattern, since we would expect the differences between the first half and the second half of the work to be most visible at the extremes. To take one example, I assume that the extended treatment of the German mutinies that fills most of Book I is at least partly designed to match the mutinies at the end of the work that drove Nero to suicide and various generals to the throne. Syme's hexad theory emphasizes this pattern, to the exclusion of the other two. That means that my theory subsumes Syme's, and I have no trouble with his comparison of the Tiberian hexad to the Neronian portion, though I prefer to think that the latter was a tetrad, not a hexad.

3. Finally, we can compare the parts in interlocking order: **Odd against Even**, as it were, pitting Tiberius and Claudius against Gaius and Nero. My 'ogdoad' theory emphasizes this aspect, though it actually combines it with the first pattern, early versus late. Mathematically, we might say that Tiberius is to Gaius as Claudius is to Nero, and Tiberius is to Claudius as Gaius is to Nero. This brings me back to the question of the shape of the *Annals* from another angle. Though impossible to prove, it seems to me likely that Tacitus did see Claudius and Nero as even worse emperors than Tiberius and Gaius, and did see the history of the Julio-Claudians as a continuous downhill slide. If you ask how Claudius could possibly be worse than Tiberius, particularly the Tiberius we know from Tacitus, I would just quote the saying of Karl Marx about history repeating itself first as tragedy and then as farce. In Tacitus' account of the Julio-Claudians, we start with the serious tyrants, Tiberius and (I think) Gaius, and end with clownish parodies of the same, Claudius and Nero. At least Tiberius has some dignity. And Sejanus is at least a free-born male, unlike the people — Agrippina and a bunch of

freedmen — who ran things for Claudius. We might say that where an Athenian dramatic tetralogy contained three tragedies and one satyr play, Tacitus' historical tetralogy consists of two tragedies and two satyr plays.

7. Objections and Replies

Next, I would like to review a couple of specific objections that have been raised to my theory:

First, there is the notorious similarity between the openings of Books I and XIII, particularly the repeated theme of the 'first crime of the new principate' (this is quotations 3a and 3b on your handouts). The word repetitions are certainly striking, not just *primum* and *prima* placed first in their respective sentences, with *noui principatus* or *nouo principatu* following soon after, but *ignarum* referring to Agrippa in the first, and *ignaro* to Nero in the second. The contrast between Silius, the 'golden sheep', and Agrippa Postumus, so savage that he can only be killed with great difficulty by an experienced soldier, even when taken by surprise, seems pointed.

However, in using these two passages to link his first and third hexads, Syme does not stop to consider that the reigns of Gaius and Claudius must also have had 'first crimes'. If we had the beginnings of Books VII and IX, I am fairly confident that the theme would be repeated in both. There was certainly no shortage of crimes in either principate, and one of them must have come first in each case. If we press Syme's hexad theory, we would have to believe that the theme occurred three times, in Books I, VII, and XIII. I think the theme of 'the first crime of the new principate' occurred four times, in Book IX as well. In fact, it is easier to come up with a first victim for Claudius than for Gaius: that would be Cassius Chaerea, of course.

The only really incredulous-sounding question I got when I presented the middle part of this paper in Nashville was whether all the remaining events of Nero's reign could really fit into the end of Book XVI. Syme gives a good summary of the problem (quotation 4 on your handouts). This is a definite weak point in my theory, but far from devastating, for several reasons:

a. First, as Clifford Ando has emphasized in an article in the *American Journal of Philology* two or three years ago — I’m afraid I neglected to pack the slip of paper containing the exact reference —, ancient books varied enormously in size, even when they were parts of the same work.

b. Second, if 16 books are too few, 18 books are too many, and would have required at least as much padding as 16 would have required compression. If they were written in 18 books, the *Annals* would have an average of just about exactly three years per book. Allowing two and a half books for the last two years of Nero’s reign, or for the two and a half years that would take the story up to the beginning of the *Histories*, seems out of proportion, even for such an exciting and event-filled time. In short, an 18-book *Annals* is at least as misshapen as a 16-book version.

Seventeen books would have been just about right, but seems *a priori* unlikely, though perhaps not absolutely out of the question. After all, Silius Italicus wrote seventeen books of *Punica*, but that is no doubt because the Second Punic War lasted seventeen years — perhaps also because the collected works of his idol Vergil add up to seventeen books, so his *Punica* are a match for the sum total of *Eclogues*, *Georgics*, and *Aeneid* in bulk and in meter, if in no other respect. Horace seems to have had some Callimachean precedent for his collection of seventeen *Epodes*, though that is a complex question that I can’t go into here. Despite these parallels, I do not think Tacitus is likely to have written seventeen books of *Annals*, which would also require thirteen for the *Histories*, another unlikely number, if we want to stick with Jerome’s total of 30. That brings us back to 16, which still seems better than 18.

c. Third, I don’t see that Tacitus would necessarily have felt obligated to cover the end of 68 and link up with the *Histories*. The basic facts were available elsewhere. Similarly, if somewhat tangentially, modern historians may complain, but the main reason Tacitus didn’t worry about the military, geographic, and economic details was that such information was readily available to anyone who wished to inquire. It surely never occurred to him that the *Acta Senatus* and all the rest of the archives, the second-string historians and the plodding annalists, along with the vast majority of the public

inscriptions, might be lost beyond retrieval, while his own works (or some of them) and the human race survived.

d. The fourth, and most important, reason for thinking that 16 books would have sufficed is that Tacitus demonstrates in his surviving books that he is perfectly willing to expand and compress his accounts of events without much regard for what modern historians would consider their relative importance. I suspect that he sometimes does so just to show off, like a Hellenistic poet. For the end of the *Annals*, a dizzying spiral of destruction, as Nero reacts (or fails to react) to one devastating blow after another, might have been more dramatically effective if compressed within a relatively few gripping pages. Of course, if we had the end of the *Histories*, we would have a better idea of Tacitus' methods for finishing off a tyrant and a dynasty.

8. Competing Distortions

Besides the objections just outlined, the main problem with my theory is that it will be very difficult to prove. It might seem easy enough in theory to compare Tacitus' account to the historical facts so as to judge the extent to which he has reshaped or deformed them to fit a preconceived plan. (Of course, it would still be very difficult in practice, since so much of Tacitus does not survive, and so many of the historical facts are available only in Tacitus' version.) However, besides lack of information, there are numerous other sources of distortion which are hard to distinguish from ogdoad patterning, and these will immensely complicate my endeavor. I will briefly outline five of them, with an example or two for each.

1. First, there are what I would call **philosophical** distortions. To take an obvious example, Tacitus makes Tiberius in particular resemble the philosophers' ideal tyrant. I suspect that historians' accounts of changes of régime are almost invariably influenced by what Plato and Aristotle say about the political cycles in which tyranny, oligarchy, and democracy are transformed into each other.

2. Second, there are what I would call **tragic** distortions. It has been argued very plausibly that Tacitus uses tragic patterns to depict the downfalls of Sejanus and Agrippina. It is possible to go too far with this sort of thing. There used to be a web-site in

Prague called the ‘Gospel according to Seneca’, which argued ingeniously and apparently seriously that the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and I think also John were all loose and second-hand translations of a lost tragedy of Seneca. The worldwide web has been a duller place since that particular site disappeared. Reconstructing Seneca’s *Christus Tragoedia* might be an interesting exercise for the most advanced level of Latin verse composition. Although, as I have said, it is possible to go way too far with this sort of thing, nevertheless, given the wide reach of Greek culture in the ancient Mediterranean, the idea that dramatic, and specifically tragic, patterns of *hubris*, *até*, and *peripeteia* should be found in Roman histories — or even in Aramaic gospel narratives — is far from absurd. When they are found, they will tend to distort the historical facts in ways that make it much more difficult to detect the other kind of distortion that I am looking for.

3. Third are what I call **comic** distortions. Tacitus gives Tiberius and Claudius many of the stock characteristics of old men, particularly as seen on the comic stage, characteristics such as timidity and frugality. Similarly, he gives Gaius and Nero many of the stock characteristics of young men, such as recklessness and extravagance. This practice produces a very delicate problem. If both Tiberius and Claudius are depicted as frugal, is that because Tacitus wishes to align them with each other in accordance with my ‘ogdoad’ theory, or because they were both old and old men are proverbially frugal, or because they both were in fact frugal? The latter two are hard to distinguish: after all, stock characteristics often have a good deal of truth in them. And either one will be very difficult to disentangle from the first, the one I am interested in.

4. Fourth and fifth on my list are what I will call **historical** distortions, at least until I think of snappier names for them. An emperor may be assimilated to a predecessor or ancestor, and this must have worked to smooth out and falsify their actual characters. For instance, Suetonius at least by implication depicts Tiberius as a typical member of the *gens Claudia* in his arrogance and contempt for the masses. He also depicts the emperor Gaius as a typical Gaius Julius in his violent death, alleging falsely that all of the Caesars with the praenomen *Gaius* had died violently. And of course, Seneca, after being appointed Nero’s tutor, is said to have dreamt that he was tutoring a second Gaius. This sort

of historical distortion applies not only to emperors but to any prominent Roman who was not a *nouus homo*: the two Catos, the two Brutuses, and dozens more. And it applies all the more strongly because they sometimes consciously modeled themselves on their predecessors.

5. Finally, there is the other kind of **historical** distortion, where an emperor is assimilated to one or more of his **successors**, particularly those who reigned in the historian's lifetime. It seems to be generally agreed that Syme went much too far in reading Tacitus' *Histories* and *Annals* as examples of the 'histoire à clef', as it were. And I think we can safely assume that Tacitus was infinitely more intelligent than the average American television commentator, who thinks every foreign war is a Viet Nam and every domestic scandal a Watergate — or some kind of 'gate' or other. Nevertheless, he must have been at least susceptible to seeing Domitian and Nerva and Trajan in some of their predecessors. The alternative is to suppose that he was a passionless antiquarian bookman who never looked out the window to see what was happening in his own day, and that seems unlikely, to say the least. I might believe it of Pliny, a man who could keep on reading Livy even as Vesuvius erupted in plain view, but surely not Tacitus. To put it another way, Syme alleges that Tacitus deformed the historical record to make various earlier emperors resemble his contemporaries Nerva and Trajan. I claim that he did so to make them resemble or contrast with each other in significant ways.

I suspect that the five types of distortion I have just outlined do not exhaust the possibilities, and will be glad to hear of any others I should add to my list. They certainly do not leave much in the way of firm ground on which to stand.

9. The Way Ahead

My method of research in the bulk of the book I have in mind would be something like this. First pick a character trait, e.g. addiction to wine, which is ascribed by the sources to 'Biberius Caldius Mero' and to Claudius, but not to Gaius or Nero — something I forgot to mention in my Nashville lecture. Second, line up the evidence for the drinking habits of all four emperors, scrupulously distinguishing which bits come from Tacitus himself, which from sources who might be thought likely to depend on

Tacitus or to agree with him (e.g. Pliny and Suetonius), and so on through decreasing levels of usefulness. Third, carefully weigh the evidence for any hints of an attempt on Tacitus' part to depict the four emperors in pairs — or other interesting patterns. The result would be not entirely unlike the Synoptic Gospels as rewritten by Suetonius.

This project will likely take a few years. That is why I wanted to put my hypothesis on record, as it were, before anyone else could think of it: though it will be hard to prove, it seems so obvious. And of course, if anyone has any evidence for or against my theory, please let me know.