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The new subterranean: mining the past in Tacitus *Annals* 16 and other Nerva/Trajanic texts

Working paper, outline

This sketch for a paper rubs off Emma Buckley's piece 'Tacitus, epic successor of Valerius' (after Joseph 2012¹), in that it does more to underscore Tacitus' close engagement with epic poetry - in this case, narratives of foundation in the early books of Virgil's *Aeneid*. I'm aiming to expand on Philip Hardie's reading of the Bassus episode at the beginning of *Annals* 16, a story which (like Suetonius' account in the *de vita Caesarum*) sets up Nero's descent into hell as a grotesque un-foundation.² More broadly, I am interested in what Tacitus does with the metaphors of mining in this passage, and with the motif of buried treasure 'growing' as it is gossiped about and then dug up (or not) to ensure 'future prosperity', which perhaps suggests a satirical dialogue with *Agricola* 3.2 (the Nerva-Trajanic age as resurrection, slow growth, or return from the dead). The beginning of what is possibly the final book of the *Annals* sneers at Nero's own failed attempt to renew by reinventing the past, a plot which instead marks the incipit of his demise.³ But it can also be seen to interrogate the process of history writing in the *Annals* generally (especially as a project of laying bare or 'unclosing' dissemblance) and the historian's role in digging up the past *praesentibus bonis* (*Ann.* 16.1).

Chapters one to three of *Annals* 16 explicitly repress (or 'bury') the dazzling display of gold in Dido's palace in *Aen.* 1.640-741 in order to dig up and rewrite the first book of Virgil's epic. The Trajanic *Annals* are still 'mining' the Augustan past, a metaphor loaded – potentially – with moral negatives.⁴ We start from a revision of Dido's dream (at *Aen.* 1.353-360) which in Tacitus comes to stand for the deceptive, seductive composition of stories. Here Nero's attempt to recapture the ideological power of Augustus' age of gold is dramatized as the fantasy to *literally* dig up the gold that Dido apparently buried when she founded Carthage.⁵ Tacitus recounts how a crazy

¹ Joseph (2012) *Tacitus the Epic Successor. Virgil, Lucan and the Narrative of Civil War in the Histories*. Brill.

² Hardie (2012) *Rumour and Renown. Representations of Fama in Western Literature*. Cambridge 301-13. Also see Braund (1983) 'Treasure-trove and Nero' *Greece and Rome* 30.1: 65-69, and O'Gorman (2000) *Irony and Misreading in the Annals of Tacitus*. 144-175.

³ Is *Annals* 16 the last book? As Hardie (2012, 310) suggests, if it is, the tale of *fama* run wild makes a neat ring with the narrative of rumours and messages that 'are likely to have constituted the last part of the Tacitean account of the reign of Nero, if Tacitus' own one-line summary of those events at *Hist.* 1.89 is any guide: *Nero, deposed more by messages and rumours than by force of arms.*' He adds (311), 'within the overall structure of the *Annals* the end of the Julio-Claudian line as a result of rumour would be a fitting conclusion to a story that, for Tacitus, begins with the succession at the beginning of book 1 of Tiberius through the agency of *fama*.'

⁴ Cf. Horace *C.* 3.3, Pliny *NH* 33.

⁵ On the 'rebirth' of the golden age under Nero, and on Nero's modelling of his reign on that of Augustus, see e.g. *Suet. Nero.* 10.1, *Sen. Apocol.* 4 (on the descent of '*aurea saecula*', implicitly connected with the new dawn and 'bright

Carthaginian by the name of Caesellius Bassus managed to buy an interview with the emperor by claiming he had discovered a deep cavern full of unwrought bullion on his estate. He had been told of its location in a prophetic dream, in which it was revealed that Dido had hidden the treasure after her flight from Tyre and her foundation of Carthage, because she feared that too much wealth might prove a corrupting influence on the nation's youth. Naturally, the tale inspires even more lust for gold in Nero, and he orders a mission to recover the treasure without first examining the credibility of the story. Bassus' dream then takes flight as *fama*.⁶ The people gossip about whether or not it is true, and at Nero's quinquennial games, the incident becomes fresh fodder for orators' praise of the emperor. The golden age really has returned, they all declare, in speeches that drip with cynical sycophantry, for the earth itself has begun to offer up riches.

In these three paragraphs, Tacitus concentrates all the vocabulary of hiding, founding and illusion which structures *Aeneid* 1, and transmits Neronian perversity as the voracious messing up of categories and characters, space and time. Most obviously Punic Bassus, as Denis Feeney notes, comes across as a 'second Dido' here. His dream remodels Dido's dream in *Aeneid* 1, in which Sychaeus uncovers the presence of a mass of gold and silver hidden underground (1.358-9), and like love-sick Dido, he is driven by a *mens turbida* ('troubled mind') and finally commits suicide.⁷ Yet while Bassus fits the role of mad Dido's envoy from the underworld-past, his trip from Africa to Rome (*vectus Romam*) also sullies Aeneas' journey from the shores of Libya to Latium. He doubles up, too, as the new Pygmalion, out to trick a Dido-esque emperor full of 'empty hope'. We might compare *Ann.*16.1.1: *inlusit dehinc Neroni fortuna per vanitatem ipsius*, and 16.1.3: *gliscebant interim luxuria spe inani*, with *Aeneid* 1.351, where Venus tells how Pygmalion 'tricked the loving bride with empty hope (*vana spe lusit amantem*).

Bassus' scheme, or delusion, makes him a deranged '*auctor*' (16.2.1) of a Neronian *Aeneid*, and an apt partner to '*artifex*' Nero himself, as well as a specular double for the *Aeneid*-quoting *auctor* at the beginning of Seneca's *Apocolocyntosis*, who is never believed (but whose account the loosed-mouthed narrator repeats).⁸ It's no accident that Nero's seduction by this *auctor* (who is eventually discredited and forced to suicide) is sandwiched between the deaths of Lucan+Seneca in book 15, and of Petronius later on in book 16 – all of whom succeed, unlike the emperor, in 'writing' their own endings. Bassus picks up a barely hidden thread of Virgil's story and winds it in

sun' of Nero's approaching reign. The new emperor displays his 'shining and luminous face' to the people); *Calp.Sic.*1.42 (*aurea secunda cum pace renascitur aetas*), cf. '*aurea regna*' at line 22 of the second of the 'Einsiedeln Eclogues'. Tacitus reports at *Ann.*12.58.1 how Nero 'took up the cause of Ilium', and spoke at length 'on the Trojan descent of the Roman nation, on Aeneas, and on other traditions not too far removed from fable', cf. *Calp.Sic.*1.45, *Suet.Nero.*7.

⁶ See Hardie's reading (2012, 307-313).

⁷ Feeney (2007) *Caesar's Calendar. Ancient Time and the Beginnings of History*. Berkeley, LA, London. 136.

⁸ Suetonius famously writes Nero's last words as '*Qualis artifex pereo!*' ('I die such an artist!'): *Nero.*49.1.

a new and surprising direction. The emperor who sees himself as ‘last of the Aeneadae’⁹, and who apparently burns his own city in 64CE in a remake of ‘The fall of Troy’ (an event which has Tacitus struggling to deal with multiple *auctores*, *Ann.*15.), also channels the subversive, lustful forces that Dido and the space of the cave (*specus*) represent, which were dangerous obstacles to Aeneas’ successful arrival in Italy and hence to the foundation of Rome.¹⁰ Like Dido in *Aeneid* 1.360-4, Nero dispatches ships in haste, with the crucial difference that Dido’s fleet is already laden with gold. At the same time, Nero too is the greedy Numidian prince reincarnated, *auri caecus amore* (*Aen.*1.349). In longing to unearth what Dido, in this version, covered up to keep her new city stable, the emperor’s vision symbolically undoes the foundation of Carthage, letting loose the lust, oriental excess and sheer power that Carthage incarnates in the *Aeneid* and in Roman history.¹¹ He is entranced by the idea of performing an obscene mime of foundation which nevertheless makes explicit the way in which *condere urbem* must negotiate the fuelling and enchainment of desire. Such is his blindness that he wants to dig up gold without scratching below the surface of Bassus’ account (*non auctoris, non ipsius negotii fide satis spectata* 16.2.1), so that – poetically - his non-examining of credibility (*non fide spectata*) places him inside the dark, Platonic-Lucretian version of the dreamt-up cave (*specus*, 16.1.1, 16.3.2).

Fama, together with Bassus’ and Nero’s deranged minds, play tricks with Virgil’s text.¹² In the line that describes Dido, ‘*Dido Phoenissam Tyro profugam condita Carthagine illas opes abdidisse*’ Tacitus recalls the opening lines of the *Aeneid*, which refer to Aeneas, *fato profugus...multa quoque et bello passus, dum conderet urbem* (‘exiled by fate, long suffering in war, until he should found a city’ 1.2-5).¹³ Just as Bassus and Nero, in this dream-like story about a dream, can be seen to play the roles both of Aeneas and Dido, so Tacitus wickedly overplays the alliance between the two exiled leaders in *Aeneid* 1, and rewrites a Dido who successfully founds a city by extinguishing the very fires (*ne...reges...accenderentur*) that raged inside her in Virgil’s narrative. This sage, self-controlled Dido highlights a rash, pathological Nero who appears here as the true enemy of Rome, ready to unleash and embody the conflagration that *even Dido* saw fit to

⁹ Dio Cassius 62.18.3-4

¹⁰ Tacitus writes that Nero presents the fire of Rome as the fall of Troy (*Ann.*15.39.3), and his description is closely based on Virgil *Aeneid* 2. Cf. Suetonius, *Nero.*38. Suetonius uses the word ‘*furor*’ to describe the madness kindled by the hope of a vast hidden treasure in North Africa: implicitly Nero channels Dido’s fire and insanity in *Aeneid* 4.

¹¹ In the *Aetna*, we find an explicit articulation of the idea that unlocked chthonic forces (here, the winds, standing for all subterranean, Volcanic *opera*) are responsible for destroying the foundations of cities: *hinc venti rabies, hinc saevo quassat citatu / fundamenta soli ; trepidant urbesque caducae* (171-2).

¹² Fama takes off as a result of the imagined unearthing of Dido’s treasure: we are reminded of the passage in the *Laus Pisonis*, where the young author asks for the path of fame to be opened up for him and the ‘shadow of obscurity’ to be removed, saying ‘what use is a hidden vein of precious metal, if there is no miner?’ (224-6). Even Virgil’s *Aeneid*, he adds, may have ‘lurked obscure in the shadow of the grove’ (*nemoris latuisset in umbra* 233) had he not had Maecenas.

¹³ Although Dido and Aeneas are both exiles and declare themselves to be so in *Aeneid* 1, the adjective *profugus* is only used, in the important opening lines, of Aeneas. *Profugus* has a jarring effect here, at *Ann.*16.1, because the word seems to ‘belong’ to Aeneas, not to Dido.

entomb.¹⁴ Dido's restriction on wealth was designed to control primitive appetites, yet in believing the treasure was a long-term investment to 'increase prosperity in modern times' (*augendis praesentibus bonis*), Nero misunderstands the paradox of restriction as a condition of expansion. Similarly he mimics AUGustus' legacy by 'puffing up' AUCtor Bassus' report (*augeat ultro rumorem*, cf. *augeatque cotidie felicitatem temporum Nerva*, Agr.3.2): yet his gluttonous desire to crack open Dido's caves, the last frontier overlooked by Augustan empire, is all hot air - a perverse excrescence.¹⁵ The goal of *imperium sine fine* is reborn in Tacitus as deluded imperialist longing. His Nero resurrects the pastoral golden age as mass hysteria (Bassus' dream has not only the army, but all the farmers in Italy out digging up the land), and turns empire's project of opening *latebrae* into a surreal treasure-hunt. Tacitus paints a Nero who understands how great epic works like the *Aeneid* grow out of arcane, underground spaces, but who will never find the inspiration he craves or understand the paradoxes that constitute the Augustan past. Yet the historian is another perverse *auctor*, we might say: Bassus played mind games with the emperor, just as the historian moulds and exaggerates Nero to fit his own story.

Nevertheless, we might understand Nero's pathology and 'mistake' in Tacitus in terms of a dumb literal reading of the metaphor of digging which conjoins imperial foundation and epic literary endeavour in imperial Rome. As the poet of the *Aetna* suggests, there is a gulf between poetic explorations of what lies beneath the surface of the earth and actual, exploitative mining.¹⁶ The good epic poet (like the good historian?) is not weighed down by the plebeian investigation of actual mining, because his quasi-scientific journeys to the centre of the earth are as light as imagination itself. Whereas mining tortures the earth and sees nature as a hostile force to be tamed and exploited, the poet's mountain music is allied with earth's depths and can therefore project both scientific modernity and timeless golden age harmony. In neglecting to question Bassus the *auctor*, Nero becomes the dud reader, or more precisely the *bad historian*, his lavishness a caricature both of Saturnian abundance and of poetic expressivity.

¹⁴ In quoting Turnus words at *Aen.*12.646. '*usque adeone mori miserum est?*' ('is it so dreadful a thing to die?'), the freedmen at Suetonius, *Nero* 47.2 implicitly identify Nero with Aeneas' enemy, Turnus. At *Nero.*54 Suetonius also reports that if Nero had lived he would have danced 'Virgil's Turnus' at his victory games. Nero and his reign are often associated in Roman literature with blazing heat and consuming fire, culminating in the fire he apparently started to destroy the city of Rome in 64. See also Suet.*Nero.*11.2, describing how at the *Ludi Maximi*, a Roman play of Afranius was staged entitled 'The fire', in which the actors were allowed to carry off the furniture of the burning house and keep it. At *Nero.*38.1, Suetonius reports that when someone in a conversation quoted 'When I am dead, let earth be consumed by fire', Nero replied, 'No, rather while I live', before setting fire to the city.

¹⁵ The noun *auctor* (from *augeo*) literally means 'one who promotes increase'. Gowers (1994) 'Persius and the decoction of Nero' in J.Elsner and J.Masters (eds.) *Reflections of Nero*, 131-150. discusses how the metaphor of growth can be traced through a range of Neronian texts which depict Nero and his reign as overgrown, overripe, stuffed yet ultimately fruitless and prematurely withered, as compared (explicitly or implicitly) with the 'good' growth and golden rebirth of the Augustan era.

¹⁶ *Aetna*, 254-301.

I'm interested in exploring further the paradoxes of *Annals* 16's inevitable miming as well as satirising of Nero's authorial strategies and forensic eye, especially in the light of the (probably Neronian) poem, *Aetna*. (How) might we join dots between texts written in the late 90s up to the 120s to get a sense of what exactly they do with the loaded poetics of the subterranean which looms so large in Augustan and especially Neronian literature (in the final books of the *Annals* as we have them, Tacitus engages with all the locked-in intensity of Perseus, Seneca, Petronius and Lucan)? The contrast between the murky caverns of *Ann.*16's spatially-driven narrative and the modern *ab urbe condita* of Frontinus' *de Aquis* (where pipe work above and below ground is precise, secure, and salubrious), or the invisible, complex yet entirely reliable and morally appealing plumbing of Pliny's villas in the *Epistles* (e.g. 5.6) could not be starker. Tacitus has the end of the Julio-Claudian age loop back, perversely, to its beginnings, yet (possibly) his last book is also the underworld out of which the *saeculum beatissimum* of *Agr.*3.1 is born. Texts like Statius' *Silvae* have already worked to rewrite the standard moralistic line on mining as epitomising imperialistic greed (which underpins Tacitus' account of gold-digging Nero), and the *Aetna* turns around the subtle distinction between the *voluptas* of intellectual digging/refoundation, and the trivial curiosity of the treasure-hunter scrabbling about in every cave and cranny. The open question I'm leading up to is whether the new, encyclopaedic, already light (in all senses) literature that seems to characterise the peaceful 'age of the adoptive emperors' can sustain the desire to probe and dig up which propels all reading and intellectual inquiry while also rendering that desire 'safe'.