

Katie Low: 'War and Peace in the Panegyricus: initial observations on *metus hostilis*'
Working Papers in Nervan, Trajanic and Hadrianic Literature 1.13 (24/8/13)

War and Peace in the *Panegyricus*: initial observations on *metus hostilis*

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Posidonius seems to have been the first author to recount a debate that was said to have taken place in 146 BC between Cato the Elder and Scipio Nasica over the relative merits of destroying Carthage and retaining the city as a counterweight to Rome.¹ Subsequently the application to Rome of *metus hostilis*, the notion that collective fear of external enemies serves as a salutary force in a state, was popularised by Sallust. In the *Bellum Catilinae* and the *Bellum Iugurthinum*, the historian surveys the recent past and presents Carthage's defeat, and the consequent disappearance of *metus Punicus*, as a cause of subsequent Roman political and moral decline (*BC* 6-13 and *BJ* 41-2), while in the fragmentary *Histories* he also stresses the importance of *metus hostilis* for Rome.²

In addition to the attention that has been paid to Sallust, recent studies by historians of political thought have also considered the idea's recurrence in post-classical theory,³ but it is striking that little work has been done on *metus hostilis* in imperial literature and historiography.⁴ This paper is intended to be preliminary to a wider investigation of the role of *metus hostilis* under the principate, which will examine how authors from the 20s BC to the 120s AD responded to various moments of political stress and actual or threatened internal conflict by exploring the connection between internal concord and the pursuit of wars against foreigners. The study will examine how *metus hostilis* is deployed in the praise of 'good' emperors, but it will also consider the possible tensions inherent in the fact that a trope made famous in the first century BC as an explanation for the strife that ultimately led to the dissolution of the republic continued to be used under the principate.

Indeed, authors of the early imperial era seem to have drawn on *metus hostilis* in a number of different ways. In my recently completed doctoral thesis (Low (2013)) I have argued that Tacitus repeatedly refers to ideas linked to *metus hostilis* when he stresses the Julio-Claudian principate's origins in civil war, and its potential to engender further strife, in *Annals* 1-6. Verbal hints and historical developments in Rome and amongst foreigners reveal

¹ Gruen (1984) 352 and n. 189; cf. Kapust (2011) 38-9. For earlier occurrences of *metus hostilis* in ancient thought, see Kapust (2008) 358-62 and (2011) 39-41, and Bellen (1985).

² See Lintott (1972) 627-8, Wood (1995) 178-9, Jacobs (2010) 124 and Kapust (2011) 38-52.

³ e.g. Evrigenis 2008 and Kapust 2008.

⁴ See, however, La Penna (2008) on Livy and Jacobs (2010) on Silius (at 126 n. 8 previous work on the subject is listed).

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key differences and similarities between Romans and non-Romans, and their respective progressions over time from external conflict to civil war (and autocracy). Various individuals, both Roman and foreign, attempt to reverse the process and convert civil strife into external warfare, but their efforts prove vain. This in turn raises further pressing questions about whether *metus hostilis* can be restored at all, and what the putative consequences of such a restoration would be.⁵

For the moment, though, the deployment of the idea of *metus hostilis* in the *Annals* suggests that it would have been broadly familiar to an elite audience at the turn of the second century AD, who may not all have adopted so pessimistic an approach. What follows will focus on the *Panegyricus* of Tacitus' contemporary Pliny the Younger,⁶ the speech of thanks to Trajan originally delivered in September 100 as Pliny took up the office of suffect consul.⁷ Scholars have discussed at length how Pliny's acclamation of the new emperor's qualities is entwined with a programme of ideal imperial virtues, and with denigration of Domitian.⁸ It will now be argued – with particular reference to the first section of the speech's narrative – that thoughts of *metus hostilis* have influenced these aspects of the *Panegyricus*.

Once Pliny has completed his opening remarks (1.1-4.3),⁹ he programmatically hails Trajan's singular combination of talents in different spheres, not least the military and the civil (*saepe ego mecum, patres conscripti, tacitus agitavi, qualem quantumque esse oporteret, cuius dicione nutuque maria terrae, pax bella regerentur...at principi nostro quanta concordia quantusque concentus omnium laudum omnisque gloriae contigit*, 4.4, 6). The ability to excel both at home and in external affairs is declared to be of great importance for a *princeps*, but only at chapter 20 does Pliny begin to describe how Trajan has demonstrated his extensive range of virtues as emperor in Rome. Prior to that, in the first part of the speech proper (5-19), he stresses first the circumstances of Trajan's elevation and then his military career, from its origins to the present day.

⁵ I am very grateful to my doctoral examiners, Dr Katherine Clarke and Dr Ellen O'Gorman, for suggesting how I might explore these issues further.

⁶ For recent reassessments of the relationship between Tacitus and Pliny, see Griffin (1999) and Whitton (2012).

⁷ Roche (2011b) is an introductory discussion of the work. Most scholars assume it was published, after expansions (cf. *Ep.* 3.18.2), the following year but some have suggested a date as late as 107: see Morton Braund (1999) 67 and n. 40 and Woytek (2006). See also n. 12 below.

⁸ See e.g. Ramage (1989) 642-54 (with Wilson (2003)), Morton Braund (1999) 58-66 and Roche (2011b).

⁹ Innes (2011) 78-84 discusses the structure of the speech.

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Trajan's accession is initially characterised as having happened not as a consequence of *bella civilia nec armis oppressa res publica* but rather of *pax et adoptio et tandem exorata terris numina* (5.1). The fearful possibility of civil war, which is said to have been what persuaded Trajan to accept adoption by Nerva, is then evoked more strongly: *cogi porro non poterat nisi periculo patriae et nutatione rei publicae; obstinatum enim tibi non suscipere imperium, nisi servandum fuisset* (5.6).¹⁰ Pliny then suggests that the praetorian mutiny of 97 was somehow desirable,¹¹ as a means of inducing Trajan to intervene (*corrupta est disciplina castrorum, ut tu corrector emendatorque contingeres*, 6.2; cf. 5.7-6.5 generally), and then praises the wisdom of his adoption (7.1-8.6). He crowns this with an oblique but unmistakable reference to Galba's adoption of Piso Licinianus in 69 (for which see Tac., *Hist.* 1.14.2-17): *oblitine sumus ut nuper post adoptionem non desierit seditio sed coeperit?* (8.5).

It is logical that Pliny should begin his survey of Trajan's imperial virtues by describing how he became *princeps*, but this stress on how civil war was forestalled is striking. The parallel with 69 evokes a counterfactual version of the events of 97 and implies that, if Trajan had not been present, a destructive conflict of the kind that had occurred less than thirty years earlier would have ensued. Indeed, Pliny's references to the mutiny under Nerva are also likely to have recalled for his audience the praetorian sedition that occurred in 69 as war between Otho and Vitellius was beginning (Tac., *Hist.* 1.80-85.1). Otho – at the time an emperor, rather than the mere prospective emperor that Trajan was in 97 – resolved this only imperfectly (...*non tamen quies urbi redierat*, *Hist.* 1.85.1).

Trajan is thus cast at the opening of the *Panegyricus* as a preserver of internal concord, a state of affairs favoured by the existence of *metus hostilis*: but does Pliny suggest that the latter now been restored to Rome? As the discussion of the adoption reaches its conclusion, the implication that civil war has been avoided and the characterisation of Trajan's obedience to Nerva in military terms (*ubi deinde disciplina...?*, 9.5; cf. 10.3) prepare for the emergence of foreign warfare as a theme at 11.5.¹² Pliny praises Trajan's excellence

¹⁰ Note how the Ciceronian *rem publicam servavi* (cf. *Dom.* 99 and *Sest.* 49) has become *nutatione re publicae...imperium...servandum*. To claim directly that Trajan had saved the 'republic' would have been at odds with the implication of his modesty here – and may have drawn attention to the difference between the Ciceronian and Trajanic *res publicae* (see Gowing (2005) 4-5 on the shift in the term's meaning under the principate) – but note also how *armis oppressa res publica* (5.1) seems to be paralleled only at *Sest.* 86. The calm of AD 97 may be contrasted with the chaos of 56 BC.

¹¹ On 97 see Eck (2002) and Roche (2011b) 15.

¹² cf. Henderson (2011) 151; on Roman military *disciplina* see Phang (2008), esp. 79-80 and 287-8.

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as a general (13), surveys his military achievements (14-15), and then looks to the future celebration of hard-won triumphs, which are contrasted with Domitian's specious celebrations (16-17).¹³

He begins by recalling how Rome's enemies had exploited Domitian's laxness (*sustulerant animos et iugum excusserant*, 11.5), before noting how under Trajan *rediiit omnibus terror et metus...vident enim Romanum ducem unum ex illis veteribus et priscis...* (12.1). Now, the mere use of 'metus' when foreign enemies are mentioned does not prove that Pliny has *metus hostilis* in mind, but the way in which he develops this theme is significant. First, there is the suggestion that Trajan has restored Rome's old martial traditions. After introducing this idea at 12.1, Pliny goes on to compare the emperor's generalship with that of his predecessors. His words have a rueful post-republican edge (*hac mihi admiratione dignus imperator <vix> videretur, si inter Fabricios et Scipiones et Camillos talis esset; tunc enim illum imitationis ardor semperque melior aliquis accenderet*, 13.4), but he asserts that Trajan has, even in the absence of the conditions experienced by Romans of the past, managed to emulate his forebears: *quam magnum est unum ex omnibus patrio more patria virtute laetari...* (13.5). Later, Pliny comments on Trajan's restoration of *disciplinam castrorum lapsam extinctam* (18.1).¹⁴ Rome's glorious past is revived in the new emperor.

Moreover, this recurrence of fear in external enemies is complemented by a further theme that spans the *Panegyricus*: Trajan's success in dispelling the frightened atmosphere that prevailed in Rome under Domitian. It is introduced by the initial command that *abeant ac recedant voces illae quas metus exprimebat* (2.2; cf. especially 48.3-4, 66.4, 72.7, 83.8, 90.5). This opening announcement that internal *metus* is absent from Trajanic Rome is confirmed by the next usages of the term, which establish that no *proprius metus* (7.1) made Trajan emperor, and that Nerva's deification took place *non ad metum civium* (11.2): the next instance is the proud assertion that Rome's enemies now feel *terror et metus* (12.1). Trajan

¹³ See Rees (2001) 154-6 on Pliny's use of the *topos* of the 'good general' and Eck (2002) 214-5 on the unlikely claim at 15.3 that Trajan spent ten years as a tribune, and the general lack of evidence for his military career before 97; cf. Roche (2011b) 19-22. As Morton Braund (1999) 67 and Gibson (2011) 110 note, the *Panegyricus* was probably delivered prior to the Dacian campaigns, although see n. 6 above.

¹⁴ Henderson (2011) 152-4 discusses 12-13. Durry (1938) 13 *ad* 18.1 suggests that Pliny means the *disciplina* neglected by Domitian, but it seems likely that there are more general overtones. Note too the link to Pompey, and his civil rather than military achievements, at 29.1-2.

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has both refrained from making Romans fear him and also renewed foreigners' fear of Rome.¹⁵

This stress on Trajan's redefinition of *metus* in Rome, as well as his prevention of civil war, his reanimation of the past and his military achievements against external enemies, suggests that in the *Panegyricus* Pliny may not only be drawing on the historiographical *metus hostilis* tradition but in fact reshaping it.¹⁶ The expression '*metus hostilis*' tended, in its late republican incarnation, to denote the fear of others felt by the Romans, but it harbours an inherent grammatical ambiguity and may in theory denote either fear of an enemy or fear evoked amongst enemies.¹⁷ In stressing the terror inspired by Trajan abroad, Pliny implies that the new emperor has surpassed his republican predecessors, who allegedly lived at a time when fear of others kept the Romans united – now Trajan has united the Romans and made others afraid of Rome.

This kind of acclamation can be seen broadly paralleled in other Trajanic literature, particularly in those works that retrospectively condemn Domitian and his perceived tendency to celebrate military victories that were unworthy of the name.¹⁸ In fact Pliny goes further. By representing Domitian's blustering and weakness abroad and his menacing behaviour in Rome itself in terms of the broader historiographical notion of *metus hostilis*, he enhances his praise of Trajan and neatly yokes the latter's achievements at home and elsewhere. This approach, however, clearly contrasts with the line taken by Tacitus in the *Annals*. Pliny optimistically proclaims that Trajan's generalship will enable glorious episodes from Rome's history to be replayed, and generally glosses over the political differences between the past and the present: the principate as an institution is immutable, and what matters is how the new emperor has restored harmony to Rome. Conversely, although Tacitus was also writing under Trajan, there are no references in the extant *Annals* to the current emperor or to his campaigns, to which his attitude may not have been entirely positive.¹⁹

¹⁵ cf. 18.3 and 35.3 for other cases of Romans fearing each other, rather than foreigners, under Domitian.

¹⁶ cf. the arguments of Low (2013) 67, 84 n. 14 and 272 that Tacitus uses '*metus*' in a context evocative of *metus hostilis* at *Ann.* 2.44.2, 2.1.2 and 6.31.1. It is the most common word for 'fear' in the *Panegyricus* (17 instances, with one for *formido*, four for *timor* and 12 for *terror*), but this matches the distribution in the *Letters*.

¹⁷ cf. Gell., *NA* 9.12.13-16.

¹⁸ See Ramage (1989) 702-4 on this theme and – to take one clear example – Courtney (1980) 195-7 on Juvenal's fourth *Satire*, which appears to parody an epic poem by Statius on Domitian's Germanic wars.

¹⁹ See Woodman (2009b) 41 for Tacitus' silence about contemporary events in the *Annals*. While it is helpful to bear in mind recent reiteration (see e.g. Sailor (2008)) that Tacitus was a fully participating member of elite

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Tacitus does not entertain the idea of a return to the republic any more than Pliny does, even when he is describing the earlier history of the principate, but unlike his contemporary he seems not to believe that positive aspects of the republican past can simply be reanimated: on regular occasions his characters achieve merely incomplete military successes and also succumb to internal discord. A return to the time when Rome supposedly feared others and enjoyed domestic concord is clearly impossible, and the pervasive theme of civil war in Tacitus' historiography of the first century AD (which also, partly via allusions to Sallust, echoes the troubles of the late republic rather than the calmer period that preceded it) sharply contrasts with the harmonious present era evoked in the *Panegyricus*. Tacitus and Pliny both use *metus hostilis* to describe and make sense of the present imperial era in which they wrote, but they produce two very different views of the same world.

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society, and may not have been quite the moodily dissident critic of the principate he is often assumed to have been, in Low (2013) I tentatively suggest that a subtly wary if not critical view of Trajan's expedition against Parthia (whether it was in prospect or had already begun) can be discerned in the text of *Annals* 1-6. Tacitus' other works do mention Trajan, but only briefly and blandly: see *Agr.* 3.1 (cf. 44.5) and *Hist.* 1.1.4.

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