

»TACITUS AND HIS MANUSCRIPTS« ?

(Comments to Comments)

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The commentator does not intend to have any polemic with whomsoever.

(op. B.J.H.)

Is Tacitus a forgery?

The modern editions of Tacitus that I have seen do not refer to the allegations of forgery that have been made at various times. The following account is summarized from Mendell, who gives the same data at more length. If anyone has more data or more recent bibliographic references on this, so that this story can be put to bed, I would be grateful to receive it.

According to Mendell, since 1775 there have been at least 6 attempts to discredit the works of Tacitus as either forgeries or fiction:

- The allegation originated with Voltaire, and his claims were elaborated by a lawyer named Linguet. However the position was only taken seriously with Napoleon. The French Revolutionaries had found »tremendous comfort in Tacitus' republicanism. The modern successor to the Caesars« had therefore a strong political motive to discredit him. But these efforts ceased with the collapse of the First Empire.
- John Wilson ROSS published (anonymously!) a book entitled [Tacitus and Bracciolini: the Annals forged in the XVth century](#), London (1878) intended to

prove that Poggio had forged the works of Tacitus. (It would be interesting to know how Ross believed Poggio could forge 9th century MSS.) This work has now been added to Project Gutenberg and is online.

Comment: anonymously – Ross dedicated the book to his brother, which is cited with the full name on the title page of the book!

how Ross believed Poggio could forge 9th century MSS – read Ross's work, with the parchment and corresponding ink, as also the German forgers forging more than twenty thousand chronicles in 11th century and later to be held as the chronicles from 9th century and earlier.

- **In 1890 P. HOCHART**, [De l'Authenticite des Annales et des Histoires de Tacite](#), maintained the same idea »with a much greater show of learning, and followed up with a supplementary volume«. Apparently neither Ross or Hochart was able to convince scholarly opinion at the time.
- In 1920 Leo WIENER, *Tacitus' Germania and other forgeries*, »attempted in vain to prove by a bewildering display of linguistic fireworks that the *Germania* and, by implication, other works of Tacitus were forgeries made after Arabic influence had extended into Europe«.

Comment: attempted in vain to prove – by which opinion in vain, what is wrong with the proofs? Where are the counterarguments?

bewildering display of linguistic fireworks – which can not be extinguished by an ironic pee, if you do not have founded counterarguments!

- »**After Gaston** Boissier's brilliant book (*Tacite*, 1903) had roused new enthusiasm for the historian, Eugene Bacha (*Le Genie de Tacite*, 1906) attempted to prove Tacitus was a master of Romantic fiction ... Bacha's book does have some value for his comments on stylistic matters.«
- T.S.Jerome, *Aspects of the Study of History*, 1923, presented Tacitus as »a consistent liar by nature and deliberate choice. The book has no value because

of its overall inaccuracy, the confusion of *narratio* in a legal speech with *narratio* in history, and its wholly unconvincing method«.

Comment: Tacitus as »a consistent liar« – why do you not cite Tertullian on this subject, here on Tertullian's page?

According to Mendell, none of these writers have won general acceptance of their estimates of Tacitus, the extreme positions have been abandoned, and the general integrity of Tacitus vindicated. However as with all history, the personal element of selection and interpretation means that scholars do not necessarily accept Tacitus' view as the final and just interpretation of first-century Roman history.

It would seem that the arguments for forgery have failed to find acceptance.

Comment: the arguments for forgery have failed to find acceptance – without giving any counterarguments

Mendell also gives an extensive list of people who mention Tacitus or any of his works from the 1st century onwards. From this we can see that Tacitus is mentioned or quoted in every century down to and including the Sixth. The Seventh and Eighth centuries are the only ones that have left no trace of knowledge of our author. The *Dialogus* is not mentioned at all, however. Without quoting every reference, here are some which I found of interest.

Around 400:

- Ammianus Marcellinus publishes his history, starting where Tacitus left off. [01](#)

Comment: ... A. Marcellinus was also »discovered« by G.F. Poggio Bracciolini

- *Sulpicius Severus* of Aquitaine, [Chronicorum Libri II, 29](#), uses *Annals* 15.37 and 15.44 as his source, for the marriage of Nero to Pythagoras and the punishment of the Christians. (I should add I don't know exactly what ties to

what). English in ANF; Latin text is Sulpicius Severus. *Sulpicii Severi libri qui supersunt*. Ed. C. Halm. CSEL 1, Wien (1866). See also E.Laupot, [Tacitus' Fragment 2: The Anti-Roman Movement of the Christiani and the Nazoreans](#), *Vigiliae Christianae* 54 (2000) 233-47^{o2}

Comment: The »Tacitus« of Annals may have use *Chronicorum Libri*, if it existed, as a source as the name Annals,

Ross: ... when that title was not given to them until the sixteenth century?

- Jerome in his *Commentary on Zacchariah* 14.1, 2 cites Tacitus as the author of a history from the death of Augustus to the death of Domitian, in 30 volumes:
- »Haec omnia plenissime Josephus, qui Judaicam scripsit historiam, et multo majora quam legimus in prophetis, eos sustinuisse commemorat. Cornelius quoque Tacitus, qui post Augustum usque ad mortem Domitiani Vitas Caesarum triginta voluminibus exaravit.« (from the *Patrologia Latina* text [here](#))

»All these things [about the destruction of Jerusalem] Josephus records very fully, who wrote a Jewish History, and supports them with many things at greater length than we read in the prophets [i.e. in the bible]. Also Cornelius Tacitus, who wrote the lives of the Caesars in 30 volumes from Augustus down to the death of Domitian.« (Tr. RP)

Comment: The authenticity of records of Josephus Flavius, especially on Christians, are in general disputed,

the dispute is highly emotional as a religious matter, see the web.^{o3}

Around 500:

- Servius quotes a lost portion of the text in his commentary on the *Aeneid* 3.399.

- Orosius used Tacitus, and quotes from now lost portions of the text. Cassiodorus quotes from the *Germania* 45. Jordanes quotes from the *Agricola* 10, and is the last author of antiquity to do so.^{o4}

Comment: Or »Tacitus« used them to compose *Germania* and *Agricola*, Piccolomini discovered *Getica* of Jordanes, »used« as the first *Germania*.

Poggio Bracciolini and the works of Tacitus

Since an English version of his letters to Niccolo Niccoli on this subject is readily available, I thought perhaps it might be of interest to reproduce portions of them.^{o5}

Comment: The renaissance writers used to copy their correspondence and to distribute the copies to the interested readers, so their letters are not at all to be treated as the very personal information or communication, but as the information to be disseminated to the general public, especially »invectiva« as a predecessor of a nowadays yellow press. Poggio was famous among his contemporaries also due to his published correspondence. So it is questionable what was true and what should be believed to be true. The emphasis in letters are by commentator.

From Letter X

... As for the monastery of Corvey, which is in Germany, you have no grounds for hope. There are supposed to be a lot of books there; I do not believe the tales of fools but even if what they say were true, the whole country is a den of thieves.

Even those natives who stay in the Curia do not go back safely to their own country. So give up that idea. ... The twenty-ninth day of October [1420].

Poggio had been persuaded to come to England when the Papal curia was in particular danger, but had been deceived by his new patron, Cardinal Beaufort, who kept him very short of money. All his letters from this period are very depressed, and he was pining to go home. In the end he managed to get enough money to escape and promptly felt much happier.

From Letter XLII

... You have almost all the news, but I am keeping the honey for the last. A friend of mine, **who is a monk from a monastery in Germany** and who left us lately, sent me a letter which I received three days ago. He writes that he has found several volumes of the kind you and I like which he wants to exchange for the *Novella* of Joannes Andreae or for both the *Speculum* and its supplements, and he sends the names of the books enclosed in the letter. The *Speculum* and the supplements are volumes of great value; so see if you think the exchange should be made. Among these volumes are Julius Frontinus and several works of Cornelius Tacitus still unknown to us. You will see the inventory and find out whether these law books can be bought for a decent price. The books will be deposited in Nuremberg where the *Speculum* and supplements ought also to be taken; it is easy to bring books from there as you will see in the inventory. This is a selection; there are many other books. For he writes in this vein. 'As you asked me to mark the poets for you to choose those you would like from the list I have found many from which I chose some which you will find on the enclosed inventory'. Dear Nicolaus, write to me as soon as you can what to answer him so that everything may be done according to your judgement; I care for only a few things, which you will see for yourself.

Goodbye, I have written this in great haste. Rome, the third day of November [1425]. – Tell Nicolaus as soon as possible not to send his copy of the *De finibus* because I have found one, and the one which I am getting ready will be finished before his comes. So your affairs go stumbling on. [End]

This refers to a monk from Hersfeld. The law-books in question were very large and expensive volumes.^{o6}

Comment: *Bracciolini said that, »if he did go to Hungary he would pretend that he had come from England,« the object must have been that no one should know the country where the MS. had been recovered;..*

From Letter XLVII

... I shall say no more about **the books from Germany** except that unlike you I am not asleep but awake. But hopefully if the man I count on keeps his promise, the

book will come to us either by force or willingly. **Even so I have made an effort to have an inventory of one of the very old monasteries in Germany where there is a large collection of books**, but I shall not tell you any more so that you will not annoy me with your sarcasm. If you want to have the Spartianus, see that I have the Aulus Gellius ... Goodbye, at Rome in haste, September the twelfth [1426].^{o7}

From Letter XLVIII

... See that I have the books which I asked you for and the paper too and especially the Aulus Gellius. I shall be truly pleased if you send the Cornelius Tacitus; if you do so, I shall return your Spartianus; I ask you for this very insistently. ... Goodby and answer me even if you are angry, for then your letters bring me the greatest pleasure. Rome, the twenty-first of October [1426].

This is a reference to M. II. Niccolo was a man in constant poor health and very nervous, which made him irritable, and gave him a considerable ability to make enemies.

Comment: How do you know it?

From Letter XLIX

XLIX. I had told our friend Cosmus, just as you write, **that that monk from Hersfeld had** told someone that he had brought an inventory of more books **according to my list**. Afterward when I questioned the man thoroughly he came to me bringing the inventory, full of words and empty of matter. He is a good man, but ignorant of our studies, and he thought that whatever he found that was unknown to him would be unknown to us too and so he crammed it with books which we have, the same books that you have known elsewhere. However I am sending you the part of his inventory which describes the volume of Cornelius Tacitus and of other authors whom we lack; since these are short little texts, they must not be considered of great importance.

I have given up the great hope which I built on his promises; that is the reason why I did not make a particular effort to write you this, for if there had been anything unusual or worthy of our wisdom, I should not only have written to you but flown to you to tell you about it in person. **This monk is in need of money**; I have discussed

helping him, provided only that he gives me for this money the Ammianus Marcellinus, the first Decade of Livy, and one volume of the *Orations* of Cicero, to mention works we both have, and quite a few others, which although we have them are not to be disdained. I asked furthermore that they be carried at his risk to Nuremberg. This I am handling. I do not know how it will turn out; however you will find it all out from me in due course. ... Rome, the fifteenth of May [1427] ...

From Letter LI

... Now to more important matters. **When the Cornelius Tacitus comes I shall keep it hidden with me for I know that whole song, »Where did it come from and who brought it here? Who claims it for his own?« But do not worry, not a word shall escape me. ... I have heard nothing about the Cornelius Tacitus which is in Germany.** I am waiting for an answer from that monk. ... Rome, the twenty-fifth of September 1427.

This indicates that there was something doubtful about the ownership of the volume. It has been suggested that this is because Niccolo had 'acquired' it from the estate of Boccaccio.

Comment: The letter proves just that Poggio and Niccolo were accomplices concerning the already »found« Tacitus, that they wanted to be believed that the whatsoever suspicions were not founded and that some works of Tacitus were really in Germany.

Gordan gives here a couple of references on the subject of the rediscovery of Tacitus, and Poggio and Niccoli. [o8](#)

- P. HOCHART, *De l'authenticité des annales et des histoires de Tacite*, Bordeaux: imprimerie G. Gounouilhou, 1889. (But see above)
- R. SABBADINI, *Le Scoperte dei codici latini et greci ne' secoli XIV e XV*, 2 vols, in the revised version of E. Garin 1967. II, p.254.
- L. PRALLE, *Die Wiederentdeckung des Tacitus: Ein Beitrag zur Geistesgeschichte Fuldas und zur Biographie des jungen Cusanus*, Quellen und Abhandlungen zur Geschichte der Abtei und der Diözese Fulda XVII,

Fulda: Parzeller & Co, (1952). includes a scholarly discussion of the matter with the order and dating of Poggio's letters on the subject.

From Letter LVII

... Goodbye, the fifth day of June, 1428. I gave Bartholemew de Bardis the Decade of Livy and the Cornelius Tacitus to send you. In your Cornelius there are several pages missing in various places and in the Decade a whole column, as you will be able to see. 1428. [End]

The reference is to a copy of M. II which Niccolo had.

Comment: How do you know?

From Letter LIX

... **Cornelius Tacitus is silent in Germany and I have heard nothing new from there about his activities. ... Goodbye, in haste, the eleventh day of September 1428.**

Comment: Actually – Tacitus is not known in Germany and the monk has nothing done --- unclear enigma has a lot of solutions!

Constructive feedback is welcomed to . [Roger Pearse](#)

Tertulijanova page: http://www.tertullian.org/feedback.php?page=t_rpearse_tacitus_index.htm

Comment: See moto (com. B.J.H.)

From English translated and added notes Ivo Antich

⁰¹ (Note by trans.: Ammianus Marcellinus, a Roman soldier and historian from the 4th century CE.)

⁰² (Note by trans.: Sulpicius Severus, the 4th century CE, a Roman lawyer, christian priest, historian, author of the famous *Chronicles* and biography of St. Martin.

Nero was »officially« married with the three women and two men; the latter are Pitagoras / Pythagoras and Sporus.)

⁰³ (Note by trans.: Josephus Flavius, the Roman historian of the first century CE, Roman citizen, originally a Jew named Yosef Ben Matityahu, born in Jerusalem, wrote about the Roman and Jewish history and about the beginnings of Christianity; in the Jewish tradition, marked as a convert.

Domitian – eccentric Roman Emperor, capable but tyrannical, persecuting the Jews and Christians; he was assassinated by court officials in the year 96 CE.)

⁰⁴ (Note by trans.: Servius, Orosius, Cassiodorus, Jordanes – Roman writers, historians, between the 4th and 6th century CE.)

⁰⁵ (Note by trans.: Gian Francesco Poggio Bracciolini, 1380-1459, writer, humanist of early Italian renaissance, grown up in Florence, in service at seven popes, in the monastery libraries in Germany, Switzerland and France he discovered numerous of the classical Roman manuscripts, inter alia Lucretius's poem *On the Nature*; copies of these works he has been sending to his scholar friends; there is a meaning among researchers that authenticity of some manuscripts is being questionable.

Niccolò Niccoli, 1364-1437, a Florentine, scholar, inventor of italic fonts.)

⁰⁶ (Note by trans.: Giovanni d' Andrea or Johannes Andreae, about 1275 to 1348, the Italian expert in canon law, his work is *Novella or comments*, 1234.

Speculum iudicale, from 1271, a review of civil and canon law, by the French writer and bishop Guillaume Durand, also Durandus, 13th century.

Julius Frontinus, the Roman aristocrat, writer, 1st – 2nd century CE.)

⁰⁷ (Note by trans.: Spartianus and Aulus Gellius, Roman writers from between 2nd and 4th century CE.)

⁰⁸ (Note by trans.: Phyllis Walter Goodhart Gordan, 1913-1994, american scientist from New York; she translated from Latin into English the correspondence Bracciolini - Niccoli, ed. 1991.)

Slovenian (gajica)

Slovenian (bohorichica)

