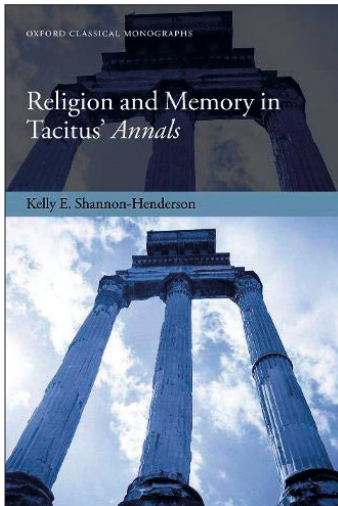


RELIGION AND MEMORY IN TACITUS' *ANNALS*



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THIS BOOK IS ONE OF A NUMBER OF PUBLICATIONS THAT have sought in recent times, as the author puts it, to take Roman religion seriously and to accord greater importance to religious ritual in understanding the workings of Roman society.¹ Shannon-Henderson makes a good case for the need to reassess the role of religion in Tacitus' *Annals*, citing examples of well-established interpretive traditions of reducing religious events to rhetorical devices rather than according them a major role in the epistemological framework of the historian. The integrated readings of Tacitus' accounts

1. Notably: Davies, 2004; Griffin, 2009; Hunt, 2016.

of religious material make for a compelling perspective. Alongside the consular historian, Shannon-Henderson offers readers Tacitus the *quindecimvir*.²

The main strength of the study is its consistent demonstration of the importance of religion in Tacitus' historical analysis in the *Annales*. While the introduction offers a sound case for using "cultic memory" as a basis for investigating the role of religion in Tacitus' record of the past, the study actually offers more than this, providing a basis for re-evaluating the nature of the *Annals* as a whole and giving religion greater prominence, and offers insights into the workings of the gods, of *fortuna*, *fatum* and *fors*. In this, it will be of service both to new readers of Tacitus and to specialists who will find in this study new emphases and new connections. Shannon-Henderson certainly leaves the reader in no doubt that attention to religion is important for understanding many of the other major narrative threads in the *Annals*, and the book will be an essential point of reference for future studies of the *Annals* in this regard.

One of the most compelling arguments of chapter one, "Tiberius the Autocrat", somewhat belies the chapter's title. Shannon-Henderson offers a convincing reading of episodes early in the reign of Tiberius in which the emperor's subjects appeal to him in a manner reminiscent of worship; these she connects with Tiberius' ambiguous interpretations of proper behaviour in regard to the divine Augustus, showing that the very presence of a deified emperor in Roman religious culture created pressures and raised questions that neither Tiberius nor his subjects knew how to handle in accordance with existing religious tradition. Tiberius' ambiguity thus appears not only as deviousness that aims at entrapping his subjects but also as bafflement in the face of intractable religious questions. Shannon-Henderson makes a strong case for reading the problems of Tiberius' principate not only as the product of Tiberius' autocratic style but also as the product of a system that nobody knew how to control. Shannon-Henderson thereby avoids overdetermined interpretation of the notoriously slippery exchanges between Tiberius and his subjects.

In chapter two: "Germanicus as Religious Interpreter", Shannon-Henderson challenges some aspects of the view that Germanicus represents a set of values rendered outdated by the world of the principate, as advanced influentially by Pelling.³ The argument made here is that Germanicus repeatedly fails to show himself adept at the kind of religious interpretation that would improve Rome's relationship with the gods. A particularly convincing piece of analysis is when Shannon-Henderson

2. See, in particular, Tac., *Ann.* XI 11, 1, when Tacitus refers to his membership of the priestly college of the *quindecimviri*.

3. Pelling, 1993.

outlines a kind of causation that aligns the will of the gods, the actions of individuals and fate, but which Germanicus is unable to interpret accurately (see in particular pp. 112-113). The implications of the similarity between this model of causation and the narrative techniques of, for instance, Virgilian epic, are not developed at length, but Shannon-Henderson's perceptive discussion of Germanicus' attempts to interpret his experience in terms of fate, fortune and the will of the gods ought to be considered by scholars working on the relationships between historical and epic narrative, especially in light of the arguments for epic influence on the *Histories* made by Timothy Joseph.⁴ Shannon-Henderson is particularly strong in the discussion of the range of meanings of *fortuna* (first introduced at p. 21). In chapter 2 she makes perceptive remarks on slippage in the ways Tacitus uses the word *fortuna*, which variously signifies, on the one hand, fortune as a supernatural force and, on the other, the status of imperial leadership – here, as in the analysis of double causation and the deforming effects of Augustus' deification on subsequent religious practice, there is a convincing integration of political analysis with religious thought.

The account of divine wrath in “*Annals* 4” chapter offers a convincing argument for reading the gods' anger as more than a rhetorical device, and at pp. 170-171 Shannon-Henderson's analysis focuses on key questions of the relationship between *deum ira* and the whole structure of the principate. In chapter five, “Fate, Astrology, and the End of Life”, Shannon-Henderson offers analysis of the relationship between traditional religion and astrology and shows how a system of divination disconnected from traditional public religion leads to foreboding without the prospect of expiatory ritual.

The Claudian books (chapter six, “Claudius and the Failure of Tradition”) are characterised as the narrative of a failed attempt at recovering decaying traditions. This analysis casts an intriguing light on the Neronian books of the *Annals*, where Shannon-Henderson explores the increasing prominence of prodigies in the Neronian books of the *Annals*, and notes the continuation of haruspicy, revived under Claudius. Even when old practices are resumed, it appears that the latter years of the Julio-Claudian dynasty show Roman traditional religion in a worse state than under Tiberius. Returning to astrology in chapter seven (“Nero: A Narrative in Prodigies”) the author offers another convincing integration of political and religious analysis. Discussing Agrippina's foreknowledge of her death at Nero's orders, gained through astrological consultation, Shannon-Henderson notes that knowledge of the future serves only to implicate even Agrippina in the religious pollution (pp.298-9). Agrippina's readiness to accept the murder provided Nero become emperor (as expressed

4. Joseph, 2012.

in the *sententia* “Let him kill me so long as he rules”, *occidat... dum imperet*, *Ann.* XIV 9, 3) shows that she is indifferent to the moral implications for Rome when their emperor is a parricide. The main strength of the chapter on Nero’s reign is the demonstration of the religious aspects of worsening tyranny: the analysis of the narrative as a spiral involving both repetition and intensification of systemic corruption applies a model most famously put forward by John Henderson famous article.⁵ Henderson is not cited here, and it is noteworthy that the book’s focus on literary techniques is detailed in some respects, but not in others. The lion’s share of the discussion of narrative dynamics is concerned with techniques such as verbal intertexts and intratexts, implicit parallels between episodes and suggestive juxtaposition; by contrast, rhetoric and authorial self-positioning play less of a role. For instance, it is stated that Tacitus is “a historian who relies heavily on his priestly persona” (p. 136), but there is relatively little discussion of how this persona is cultivated. That may, however, simply be to say that the author has put forward a compelling case, yet to be explored, for enquiring into the religious dimension of the text’s rhetoric, and this reviewer has certainly been convinced that the case for appraising the *Annals* anew in this way is strong.

The point is well made, in assessing Cossutianus Capito’s prosecution of Thræsea Paetus (*Ann.* XVI 28, discussed at pp. 343-344), that the *delator*’s rhetoric is very striking, as he feels emboldened to impugn Paetus not only for what he does but even for what he believes. The author’s argument that this is a sign, not of religious norms, but of the extremes of Neronian *delatio*, seems solid.

In one particular respect, the relationship between religion and wider social history calls for further exploration, and that is in relation to class distinctions in public religious practice. The role of class is briefly acknowledged in specific instances, but little is said about the aristocratic slant of much of the source material, for instance when it is stated in a footnote that “Irrational interpretations of natural phenomena are often characteristic of lower-class groups” (p. 29, n. 17), the perspective offered is clearly that of an elite, and the implications of the tendentious source material merit further reflection. There is relatively little attention to the inherently aristocratic nature of the priesthood and the alignment of certain types of interpretive authority with social class. On p. 288, in discussion of *Ann.* XIII 17, 1, there is some attention to the different roles of the senate (traditional, but now failed guardians of public cult) and the people (readier to interpret events in terms of the will of the gods, but traditionally excluded from authority in public religious functions), but Tacitus’ generally

5. Henderson, 1989. Also revised in Henderson, 1998, pp. 257-300.

disparaging references to the *vulgus* (the word used at this point in the text) could have been discussed further. On particular points, the author's observations raise fascinating questions. For instance, the observations on the association of astrology with non-elites (p. 227 and n. 53) strikingly contrasts with the clear vogue for astrological prediction amongst the imperial family and certain members of the upper echelons of Roman society. The conclusion "astrology... is perhaps not the best use of time for a member of the Imperial family" seems to leave open further enquiry into what the devotion to astrology meant in different social contexts.

The style of writing is accessible and does not rely on jargon to get its points across. The author succeeds in clearly explaining a wide range of ideas in a way that will be accessible to readers in a range of different fields. Especially in the early chapters, however, a somewhat distracting feature is the prolific use of the word "problematic". It is central to the arguments of the book that traditional religious practices are in decay during the Julio-Claudian period. The argument is made cogently and explored from a variety of perspectives. Nevertheless, the word "problematic" appears somewhat overused, with the consequence that it tends to conflate the portrayal of problems of many different kinds. Furthermore, it is sometimes unclear what the word means, for example on p. 139: "[G]iven the hostility of the historical tradition to Claudius, the reader is likely to have assumed that [Claudius] would be ineffective, problematic, and destructive to Rome in Tacitus' portrayal as well". Often it needs to be made clearer whose standards are being applied in deeming a practice to be problematic, for instance in the remark that the legions have a "propensity to be taken in by problematic religious ideas" (p. 171). The question sometimes arises what "unproblematic" behaviour would look like. Narratives of human attempts to understand fate and the will of the gods are seldom "problem free", and a wider range of descriptions, along with clearer signalling of point of view, would help in some of the passages in which "problematic" interpretations and behaviour are discussed.

A note on a couple of factual slips: at p. 78, n. 37, *Germania* XL 3 is cited, with reference to two commentaries, as witness to the *templum* of the Germanic goddess Tanfana, when in fact this passage describes only the sanctuary of Nerthus. Tanfana is known only from *Ann.* I 51, 1. In discussion of the last extant chapter of the *Annals* (XVI 35) at p. 347, discussion turns on Thræsea Paetus' addressing his son. In fact, Paetus had no son; the three people present are Demetrius the cynic philosopher, Helvidius Priscus (married to Paetus' daughter Fannia) and a quaestor sent by Nero to order Paetus' death. Following the words *propius vocato quaestore* (XVI 35, 1) it seems that Paetus is addressing his last extant speech to the quaestor.

This book has succeeded in enriching the picture of what "Tacitean" historiography encompasses, and ensures that in future, readers of Tacitus' works will certainly

need to give serious consideration to Tacitus the *quindecimvir*. This is a major new assessment of Tacitus' work that should be given serious consideration by anyone working on the *Annales*, and which signals the wider value of reappraising the role of religion in Roman historiography.

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