

CAPITE ABLATO: THE DECAPITATION MOTIF IN TACITUS' HISTORIES

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ABSTRACT

JOHN B. BEEBY: *Capite Ablato*: The Decapitation Motif in Tacitus' *Histories*
(Under the direction of James B. Rives)

Throughout *Histories* 1-3, Tacitus employs a motif of decapitation that functions as a metaphor for the anarchy of the so-called Year of the Four Emperors. The historian emphasizes certain beheadings common to the parallel tradition, and includes others that are unique to the *Histories*. Tacitus extends this motif to embrace metaphorical beheadings, the foremost of which is the destruction of the Capitolium, which marks the terrible climax of the first three books. Tacitus effectively abandons the motif in *Histories* 4 and focuses instead on Vespasian's good leadership and Rome's restoration. I conclude that Tacitus' use of this motif contributes to his negative analysis of Roman leadership in 69 CE.

To my parents

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INTRODUCTION

Decapitation is a recurrent theme throughout Tacitus' *Histories*. A traditional historian might say that decapitation is prevalent in the *Histories* simply because it was a common feature of Roman civil wars, but I will show that the decapitation motif in the *Histories* is a narrative device: Tacitus shows his readers the consequences of having a weak and unstable "head" of the empire by means of both historical narrative and metaphor. I first survey the instances of actual decapitations, and show that, although Tacitus generally follows the parallel tradition in his account of the Year of the Four Emperors, he includes more references to beheadings than any other extant source. I then consider his use of heads as a metaphor, and how the motif is deployed to maximum effect throughout the *Histories*. I will show that Tacitus thus uses the decapitation motif as a literary tool to structure the *Histories*, impart deeper meaning to his work, and underscore the horrific events of 69 CE.

CHAPTER 1

Actual Decapitations

The Murder of Galba

In *Histories* 1, Tacitus gives readers an image of Rome in great turmoil: Otho seized the government by force because he was angry that Galba had passed him over for imperial succession, adopting Piso Licinianus instead. In the course of this coup, Galba, Piso, and Titus Vinius, Galba's co-consul, were all beheaded, and their heads subjected to abuse. Here I will compare Tacitus' version of these events to those of the parallel tradition, and I will demonstrate that the various accounts of Galba's assassination are almost identical.

Tacitus begins the *Histories* in an annalistic fashion by deceptively proposing to begin the work in 69 CE, when Servius Galba and Titus Vinius were consuls (1.1), but he then prefaces this with eleven chapters on the events leading up to that year. Nero had committed suicide around the 9th or 11th of June 68, and on June 16th the senate declared Galba emperor, who then began his march from Spain to Rome in July. In these first eleven chapters, Tacitus ominously proclaims that 69 CE was the start of a year that spelled disaster not only for the two eponymous consuls but also nearly for Rome itself (1.11.3).

Immediately following the preface, Tacitus covers the first two weeks of January 69, including Galba's adoption of Piso, and Otho's ambitions for power. Tacitus thus provides

the reader with a dramatic backdrop and suspenseful development toward the events of January 15th, when Galba, Piso, and Vinius all lost their heads at Otho's hand.

The assassination of Galba and his entourage is the climax of *Histories* 1, and Tacitus devotes a sizable portion of his narrative to the events of that specific day (1.27-49). Tacitus' extremely detailed account of this particular date stresses its importance in the narrative. The day began, Tacitus tells us, with Galba's foreboding sacrifice at the Temple of Apollo on the Palatine Hill—we are told that the haruspex Umbricius saw danger at hand in the victim's gloomy entrails (1.27). Otho himself was in attendance and interpreted Galba's bad omens as favorable for his own treasonous plot. After Otho's slave, Onomastus, cunningly summoned Otho away for some "house-hunting," Tacitus sets the events of that ill-omened day into motion. Piso rushed to find Galba (1.39). Meanwhile, at the praetorian camp, Otho opened the arsenal and soldiers frantically armed themselves (1.38). Armed men turned Rome into a battlefield.

Galba, thinking Otho dead, traveled in a litter in the direction of the Capitoline Hill to make a thanksgiving sacrifice. People were crowding the Forum more and more, and the mobs made it difficult for Galba to pass. Tacitus remarks that a hush of fear fell over the Forum (1.40). Otho heard that there were armed men there, so he sent out the cavalry, who rampaged through the city, and trampled the senate and people. Here Tacitus says that Rome's monuments looked down on the scene of imminent slaughter with disapproval.¹

¹ Tac. *Hist.* 1.40.2: *nec illos Capitolii aspectus et imminentium templorum religio et priores et futuri principes terruere quo minus facerent scelus cuius ultor est quisquis successit.* ("And the sight of the Capitolium and the piety of the looming temples and past and future principes did not frighten them from committing a crime whose avenger is whoever succeeded.") All translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

When the horsemen finally did reach the Forum, Galba's own standard-bearer (*vexillarius*) threw Galba's *imago* to the ground,² which was a sign to all that danger was afoot (1.41), and people scattered. The emperor, perched precariously atop his litter and tossed on the sea of people, was abruptly dumped onto the ground near the Lacus Curtius. According to Tacitus, soldiers murdered Galba then and there, but not before he uttered his last words, which Tacitus qualifies with the following comment: *non interfuit occidentium quid diceret* ("It didn't matter to the killers what he said.")³ Otho's soldiers, some of whom Tacitus cautiously names, decapitated and further mutilated Galba's headless corpse, which was summarily abandoned where it fell.⁴

Vinius was next—his appeals to the clemency of Otho's men were of no avail, and they ran him through. The historian says that Piso, heir to the principate, died last that day. Piso had managed to escape the slaughter in the Forum's center by taking refuge in the Temple of Vesta, not far away. Tacitus says, contrary to other sources, that the centurion Sempronius Densus showed exemplary courage on that day and sacrificed his life to give Piso time to escape. Unfortunately for Piso, soldiers found his hiding spot, dragged him outside, and butchered him. Here Tacitus tells us that Otho was especially desirous of possessing Piso's head, and he attempts to account for Otho's motives (1.44.1). In the

² Tac. *Hist.* 1.41.1. Damon 2003: 183, "*imagines* of the emperors were fastened to praetorian standards amidst the unit's insignia and to *vexilla* below the pennant; an *imago* is visible beneath the *vexillum* in scenes 32 and 103 of Trajan's column."

³ Tac. *Hist.* 1.41.3.

⁴ Tac. *Hist.* 1.41.3, note that Galba was wearing a breastplate: *ceteri crura bracchiaque (nam pectus tegebatur) foede laniavere; pleraque vulnera feritate et saevitia trunco iam corpori adiecta.* ("Others hacked his legs and arms (for his chest was protected); and more wounds were inflicted with wildness and savagery to his already decapitated body.")

following passage, Tacitus provides the first clear use of the word *caput* to refer to actual human decapitation:⁵

nullam caedem Otho maiore laetitia exceperisse nullum caput tam insatiabilibus oculis perlustrasse dicitur, seu tum primum levata omni sollicitudine mens vacare gaudio coeperat, seu recordatio maiestatis in Galba amicitiae in Tito Vinio quamvis immitem animum imagine tristi confuderat, Pisonis ut inimici et aemuli caede laetari ius fasque credebat.⁶

Otho is said to have welcomed no slaughter with greater joy, to have gazed upon no head with such insatiable eyes, either because his mind, relieved of all worry, had begun to have time for rejoicing, or the recollection of his treason against Galba and friendship with Titus Vinus had troubled his mind with its sad image (even though his mind was cruel), while he was thinking that it was right and lawful to rejoice in the slaughter of Piso, his personal enemy and rival.

Then Tacitus offers a striking and chilling image: soldiers mounted the heads of Galba, Piso, and Vinus on pikes and carried them around amidst the standards (1.44.2):

Praefixa contis capita gestabantur inter signa cohortium iuxta aquilam legionis, certatim ostentantibus cruentas manus qui occiderant, qui interfuerant, qui vere qui falso ut pulchrum et memorabile facinus iactabant.

The heads were impaled on poles and carried about amongst the cohort standards and a legionary eagle. The mutineers vied with each other in displaying their bloody hands, whether they had actually done the killing or had merely been there, and whether their boasting of what they called a fine and memorable deed was true or false.⁷

⁵ This is in fact the second use of the word *caput* in the *Histories*, the first occurrence (1.5) is metaphorical, and I will address it later.

⁶ For the Latin texts, I have reproduced Damon 2003 (*Histories* 1), Ash 2007a (*Histories* 2), and Fisher 1911 (*Histories* 3-5).

⁷ Wellesley 1964: 29.

In the aftermath of these horrendous murders, Otho cleaned house—the bodies strewn about the Forum were burnt, and the maltreated heads found their way back to their loved-ones so that they could receive proper burial (1.47.2):

Otho cruento adhuc foro per stragem iacentium in Capitolium atque inde in Palatium vectus concedi corpora sepulturae cremarique permisit. Pisonem Verania uxor ac frater Scribonianus, Titum Vinium Crispina filia composuere, quaesitis redemptisque capitibus, quae venalia interfectores servaverant.

With the Forum still bloody, Otho, carried through the carnage of the [bodies] lying around onto the Capitoline and from there to the Palatine, allowed the bodies to be withdrawn and cremated for burial. Piso's wife Verania and brother Scribonianus buried him, [and] Crispina, Titus Vinium's daughter, buried [her father], after seeking out and buying back the heads, which the murderers had saved for selling.

Piso and Vinium receive unflattering obituaries from Tacitus (1.48). The steward Argivus collected Galba's body and buried it at Galba's estate (1.49.1). Only then does Tacitus reveal the posthumous adventures of Galba's head (1.49.1):

caput per lixas calonesque suffixum laceratumque ante Patrobii tumulum (libertus is Neronis punitus a Galba fuerat) postera demum die repertum et cremato iam corpori admixtum est.

The head, fastened and mangled by camp-followers and servants in front of the *tumulus* of Patrobius (he had been a freedman of Nero punished by Galba), was found at last on the next day and then joined with the cremated body.

Tacitus gives Galba his obituary last, including the infamous epigram: *omnium consensu capax imperium, nisi imperasset* (“in everyone’s opinion capable of rule, if only he had not ruled”) (1.49.4).⁸ In the climax of his account of 15 January, Tacitus focuses on Rome’s murdered rulers and draws the reader's attention by the reversed and confused chronology of

⁸ Damon 2003: 199 notes, "Galba, who died first, is remembered last."

events, which goes back and forth between night and day. Tacitus, however, is not the only ancient author who lays significant stress on the victims' heads, so it is important that we examine now the parallel tradition in order to see what is peculiar about Tacitus' version of events.

Five authors are our main sources for the historical events of 69 CE: Josephus, Plutarch, Tacitus, Suetonius, and Cassius Dio.⁹ Josephus, a contemporary and client of Vespasian, wrote in Greek about the period briefly in his *Bellum Judaicum*, but was mainly concerned with the activity in the East, particularly Judaea. Tacitus covered this period in his *Histories* (and perhaps in his missing books of the *Annals*).¹⁰ Suetonius wrote about it in parts of the lives of Galba, Otho, and Vitellius (as well as some parts of his *Nero* and *Vespasian*). Plutarch likewise wrote lives of Galba and Otho in Greek, which were part of a larger collection of biographies of the Roman emperors. And in his "Roman History," Cassius Dio also related the events of the "Year of the Four Emperors"—unfortunately this comes down to us in the form of epitomes of Dio's original work.¹¹

On the differences between the authors of the parallel tradition, it is worthwhile to quote Damon here: "...where accounts overlap they are generally in agreement on events and

⁹ The source citations are as follows: Joseph. *BJ* 4.492-6; Plut. *Vit. Galb. and Otho*; Tac. *Hist.*; Suet. *Ner., Galb., Otho, Vit., Vesp., and Dom.*; Cass. Dio. 64-67.

¹⁰ Damon 2003: 22-23 on the sources for Tacitus' *Histories*: "But all indications in *Histories* I suggest that T. used a single written source as the basis of his narrative. He does have more information than the authors of the parallel tradition..., but his narrative of the events of 1 January—14 March is also the longest." Damon then cites the length of Tacitus' account in comparison to those of the other authors: Tacitus' account is almost twice as long as Plutarch's, which in turn is almost three times longer than Suetonius', and Dio's (in its current abridged form) about half as long as that.

¹¹ Murison 1999: 1-4 has a discussion of the problems surrounding the text of Cassius Dio, which is actually an 11th century epitome by John Xiphilinus. Murison explains that the epitome preserves Dio's own words, but in an abridged fashion. Furthermore, we also have the 12th century text of Zonaras, who used Xiphilinus for books 64-67, but here it is thought that Zonaras mainly summarized Xiphilinus. See Damon 2003: 22-30 on the sources for the *Histories* and the parallel tradition in general. Damon 2003: 23 cites a list of possible names for the "common source." See Syme 1958b: 674-76 on Tacitus and Plutarch's sources.

they sometimes even share details of language; there are no significant differences in matters of fact. If Tacitus did supplement the common source with documentary evidence or oral testimony or with material from another written source, his supplements bulk rather small."¹² As Damon notes in the introduction to her commentary on *Histories* 1, our sources for the episode are Plutarch's *Galba* and *Otho*, Suetonius' *Galba*, *Otho*, and *Vitellius*, and Cassius Dio 64. In what follows, I will discuss and compare the accounts of Galba's death from these sources.

Plutarch's *Galba* provides the most extensive treatment afforded to Galba's demise outside Tacitus. In Plutarch's version, we have a similar, if not more pronounced, emphasis on heads and beheading.¹³ His narrative of 15 January 69 CE begins (like Tacitus') with Galba's sacrifice on the Palatine Hill.¹⁴ After Umbricius had examined the entrails of the sacrificial victim, Plutarch writes, "danger along with deceit were lying upon the head of the ruler" (καὶ μετὰ δόλου κίνδυνον ἐκ κεφαλῆς ἐπικείμενον τῷ αὐτοκράτορι).¹⁵ Through the intrigue of Onomastus, Otho left the sacrifice and went to the praetorian camp (25). News about Otho's incipient coup reached Galba, who was still on the Palatine, and he was in a quandary about what to do. Suddenly, Julius Atticus, a soldier, brandishing a bloody sword,

¹² Damon 2003: 23 goes on to say, "It is more productive to examine the parallel tradition to learn how T. used this [common] source."

¹³ Ash 1997 has written on the head/decapitation imagery in Plutarch's *Galba*. Ash argues that the imagery is part of a sophisticated narrative technique on Plutarch's part, but she does not see the equivalent complexity in Tacitus' treatment of Galba's death. Indeed, as Ash mentions, right at the beginning of Galba's biography, Plutarch compares a body of soldiers to a powerful body. Ash 1997: 196 cites Plut. Vit. *Galb.* 1.1: οἱ δὲ πλείστοι, καθάπερ ἔρρωμένον σῶμα, τὸ στρατιωτικὸν ἀξιοῦσιν ἰδίᾳ μηδέποτε χρώμενον ὀρμῇ συγκινεῖσθαι τῇ τοῦ στρατηγοῦ. For the text of Plutarch's *Galba*, I have used Perrin 1954 (Loeb).

¹⁴ Plut. Vit. *Galb.* 24-29.

¹⁵ Plut. Vit. *Galb.* 24.2.

approached Galba and claimed to have killed Otho. It was then, according to Plutarch, that Galba got into his litter and made his way toward the Capitoline Hill (26).

Plutarch describes the chaotic scene in the Forum and how Galba tottered above the sea of people. Then Otho's men, some on horseback, others on foot, rushed into the Forum and attacked Galba. Plutarch singles out Sempronius Densus as the only man to defend the emperor.¹⁶ But Densus' foes overwhelmed and outnumbered him (26.5) and Galba spilled out of his litter near the Lacus Curtius (27.1). Galba was wearing a breastplate when the soldiers attacked. Plutarch says that he bravely offered his neck to attackers, but that he received many wounds on his arms and legs. Like Tacitus, Plutarch does not name with certainty the man who dealt Galba the killing blow.

Once Galba had died, Fabius Fabulus is said to have beheaded him. Fabulus then wrapped Galba's head in his cloak (*himation*) because he could not get a grip on it due to its extreme baldness. Pressured by his friends, Fabius next mounted the head on a spear and ran around with it, just like a bacchant, as Plutarch remarks. When Otho at last received Galba's head, he was unimpressed and asked for Piso's instead. So Murcus killed Piso at the Temple of Vesta and brought Otho his eagerly awaited prize. Vinius' head was also taken, as well as Laco's. All were sent to Otho.

The murderers wanted rewards in return for their successful headhunting (28). While the decapitated bodies still in their official robes (togas?) were lying in the Forum, the heads continued to change hands: Vinius' head was eventually sold back to his daughter; Piso's wife, Verania, recovered her husband's head; Galba's was given to the slaves of Petrobius. Galba's head seems to have suffered the worst treatment. Plutarch conjectures that it was

¹⁶ Plut. Vit. *Galb.* 26.5 personifies the sun looking disdainfully upon the Forum, as opposed to Tacitus' personification of Rome's buildings.

thrown into the Sessorium, where emperors normally threw condemned prisoners.¹⁷

Helvidius Priscus then dutifully gathered Galba's body with Otho's leave, and Argivus, a freedman, buried it. Plutarch's final summation is an obituary similar to that in Tacitus (29).

We find an account similar to those of Plutarch and Tacitus in Suetonius' *Galba*.¹⁸ Like the other versions, Suetonius records the events of 15 January 69 CE starting with the morning sacrifice (Suetonius does not say where the ritual happened). Galba was killed (*iugulatus est*) beside the Lacus Curtius, and one of the common soldiers (*gregarius miles*) cut off his head (*caput ei amputavit*) (20.2). Suetonius writes that the soldier hid the head in his lap (*gremium*) and delivered it to Otho by hooking his thumb into Galba's cheek (*mox inserto per os pollice ad Othonem detulit*). The abuses to Galba's head did not abate with its delivery to Otho; they intensified. Otho gave the head to his followers (*lixis calonibusque*), who mounted it on a spear (*hasta*) and carried it around the praetorian camp, while shouting insults and jokes. Then a vengeful freedman bought the head for one hundred gold coins only to toss it aside in the place where Galba had killed his former master. And it was not until Argivus, Galba's steward, recovered the head that it joined the rest of his body somewhere on the Aurelian Way (20). Since this is a biography of Galba, Suetonius focuses only on Galba here and there is no mention of the deaths of Piso, Vinius, or Laco.¹⁹ Unlike Tacitus, who is more concerned with the Roman state and its head, Suetonius' focuses more

¹⁷ Richardson 1992: 361 does not approve of Plutarch's identification of this place with the Sessorium.

¹⁸ Suet. *Galb.* 19-23. The sacrifice scene begins at 19 and Galba is killed in 20, so it is much shorter than the other versions, hence much less detailed. For the text of Suetonius, I follow Mooney 1930.

¹⁹ The focus on the main biographical character alone seems to be typical of Suetonius. As Mooney 1930: 25 says in his introduction, "[Suetonius] does not write as a historian, and makes no pretence to do so. He is a biographer, and his interest is centred in individuals; the main historical happenings are only introduced in so far as they affected the life and conduct of those individuals. His 'sectional' system of biography makes it difficult, and at times impossible, for the reader to arrive at any precise realization of the history of the period."

on Galba's character and quotes several of Galba's remarks. Suetonius follows the account of Galba's assassination immediately with a description of his appearance (21), and his eating and sexual habits (22). Finally, Suetonius says that Galba received a memorial column which was erected where he had fallen, but Vespasian later rescinded the senatorial decree when he came to power (23).

The section on Galba's death from Cassius Dio comes to us in excerpts from Xiphilinus.²⁰ Dio also mentions the soothsayer (*ἰερόπτης*) who predicted Galba's doom (64.5.3). After Galba heard from a soldier that Otho was dead, he proceeded to the Capitolium to make a sacrifice. Dio says that horsemen and foot-soldiers attacked Galba, and cut him down in the middle of the Roman Forum (*ἐν μέσῃ τῇ Ῥωμαίων ἀγορᾷ...κατέκοψαν*) (64.6.3). They abused Galba's body and decapitated him, then stuck his head on a pole (*καὶ τὰ τε ἄλλα τῷ σώματι αὐτοῦ ἐλυμήναντο, καὶ τὴν κεφαλὴν ἀποκόψαντες περὶ κοντὸν ἀνέπειραν*) (64.6.3-4). Dio also records the actions of Sempronius Densus, the centurion who valiantly fended off Galba's attackers for a time before being slain himself. Piso (and unnamed others) also died (*ἀπέθανε μὲν γὰρ καὶ ὁ Πίσων καὶ ἄλλοι συχνοί*) (64.6.5). The last part of the account comes from Zonaras, who says that the decapitated heads were taken to Otho and the senate house, where the bloody sight scared the senators (64.6.5).²¹

The various parallel accounts are remarkably consistent, even down to the small details. There are, of course, notable differences in scope. Plutarch is writing a biography and focuses on details surrounding Galba's life; Tacitus concentrates on the broader events of

²⁰ Cass. Dio 64.4-6. For the text of Cassius Dio, I follow Cary 1925 (Loeb).

²¹ Cass. Dio 64.6.5 [Zonaras]: *Πράξαντες δὲ ταῦτα οἱ στρατιῶται, τὰς τε κεφαλὰς ἐκείνων ἀποτεμόντες, πρὸς τε τὸν Ὀθωνα αὐτὰς ἐν τῷ στρατοπέδῳ καὶ εἰς τὸ συνέδριον ἐκόμισαν, ὥστε τοὺς βουλευτὰς καταπλαγέντας χαίρειν τε προσποιεῖσθαι κτλ.*

69 CE and in this scene he turns his attention to the heads of important individuals, the consulars Galba, Piso, and Vinius. Suetonius, on the other hand, like Plutarch, highlights details only directly related to the main figure of his biography, and keeps the extra characters in the background. Dio's epitome includes many of the same details of the other three. Each author has thus chosen to include certain details and exclude others. Despite such differences, it is clear that here Tacitus has followed the common tradition.

We might say then that the emphasis on the treatment of the heads of Galba, Piso, and Vinius was thus simply a part of the tradition that Tacitus inherited. Tacitus apparently chose to omit some grotesque details (e.g., Suetonius' report of the soldier who fish-hooked Galba's head with his thumb), but otherwise maintained the common tradition's emphasis and perhaps even highlighted it. Plutarch also seems to have heightened the imagery of heads, and, as noted above, to have elaborated on its metaphorical potential. But even if here Tacitus has done little more than sustain an emphasis that he found in his sources, elsewhere in *Histories* 1-3 he has employed the decapitation motif and has done something different or altogether unmentioned in the parallel tradition.

Immediately after Tacitus provides the obituaries of Piso, Titus Vinius, and Galba, he comments on the mood in Rome, and makes his readers aware of the turbulent psychological state of the Roman people (1.50).²² He writes that everybody—senators, knights, and commoners—had civil war on their minds. Tacitus recalls the names of infamous battles in which Romans killed Romans, all from a generation past—Pharsalus,

²² This is not the only time in the *Histories* 1-3 that Tacitus discourses on civil war, in fact the subject is periodically revisited throughout the work. The other important passages on civil war are the preface (1.1-11), before the Battle of Bedriacum (2.37-38), and during the fall of Vitellius from power (3.83).

Philippi, Perugia, Mutina.²³ And he specifically uses the words *bella civilia* to refer to conflicts past and present.²⁴ He notes that civil wars had upended the Roman world before, but in the past, great men such as Julius Caesar and Augustus were able to triumph and ameliorate the situation; the Romans now had no good prospects. For the choice between Otho and Vitellius was akin to the choice between Scylla and Charybdis. Before I turn to other decapitation references in *Histories* 1-3, it will be helpful to consider the wider historical context of this practice.

A Historical Tradition of Headhunting

As Tacitus reminds us, there is a great deal of historical precedent for the beheadings that occurred in the Forum on 15 January 69 CE. In a Stanford University dissertation entitled, "Talking Heads," Amy Jervis traces the practice of headhunting and the display of elite Romans' decapitated heads well back into the Roman Republic. She argues that, originally, Roman citizens' bodies were all but inviolable.²⁵ Nevertheless, over time, and perhaps through increased contact with Celtic and Gallic tribes, who engaged in headhunting, the practice became more familiar.²⁶ For Jervis, a few specific historical events transpired which changed the way elite Romans thought about the treatment of other elite Romans'

²³ Tac. *Hist.* 50.2.

²⁴ Tac. *Hist.* 50.2.

²⁵ Jervis 2001: 6, "For practical purposes, elite men enjoyed legal and social privileges that rendered them essentially immune to violent physical punishment. Unlike slaves, non-citizens, and even low-status citizens, they were not normally answerable with their bodies for offenses. The privileged could be condemned to death for certain capital offenses, but usually escaped into a well-financed exile before the sentence was carried out. Theoretically, of course, they were always potentially subject to decapitation by the axes included in the *fascēs*. They were also subject to certain traditional aggravated punishments for exceptional offenses, such as the sack (*culleus*) for parricides or the Tarpeian Rock for treasonous offenses; but such executions were quite rare."

²⁶ Jervis 2001: 13-46 on headhunting in the ancient world.

corpses.²⁷ First, she cites the murders of the Gracchi—their deaths at the hands of other elite Romans opened the way for the similar treatment of others. Tiberius Gracchus was thrown in the Tiber, and Lucius Opimius sought his brother Gaius' head, by offering the headhunter its weight in gold.²⁸ But the pivotal moment, for Jervis the "creative event," which most influenced the later atrocities, was the "Marian Massacre" conducted by Marius and Cinna during the Social War in 87 BCE.²⁹ Appian and Cassius Dio both narrate this bloody episode.³⁰ Marius demanded the heads of only senators, perhaps in revenge for their poor treatment of him (he was a *novus homo*).³¹ Following Marius and Cinna's example, Sulla also displayed heads on the Rostra in his violent proscriptions of 82 BCE, but he further encouraged headhunters to collect heads by putting a bounty on them.³²

Pompey, Cicero, and Julius Caesar grew up during the Social Wars, and these younger men seem to have avoided displays of severed heads—perhaps they purposely rejected the Marian/Sullan brutality because they had witnessed it firsthand.³³ Nevertheless,

²⁷ Jervis 2001: 127-55 generally on this change.

²⁸ For a general historical summary of the Gracchi see Scullard 1959: 23-43. Some primary sources for Tiberius Gracchus' death are Livy *Per.* 58; Plut. *Vit. Ti. Gracch.* 20.2, *Vit. C. Gracch.* 3.3-4, 14.2; App *B Civ.* 1.16. The story of Opimius and G. Gracchus' head is found in many places, including Cic. *De or.* 2.269.

²⁹ Jervis 2001: 133.

³⁰ App. *B Civ.* 1.71 (Many are killed and all the senators' heads were exposed on the Rostra. Heads are paraded around). App. *B Civ.* 1.74 (Heads are exposed in the Forum). Cass. Dio 31 (= fr. 102.9) (Heads are put on Rostra).

³¹ Scullard 1959: 410n23, "Fourteen such victims are known; seven of these deaths are attributable to Marius. Six of the victims were consulars." Jervis 2001: 135 notes that the victims' high social status determined their fate by decapitation: "...the heads of senators had symbolic and economic value—more usually exploited in statuary, *imagines*, and coinage—which motivated their display in public."

³² Jervis 2001: 148 cites App. *B Civ.* 1.95 who writes that "Sulla was the first to publish a list, offer rewards for heads, and threaten punishment to those who concealed the proscribed."

³³ Cass. Dio 43.24.4 does say that Julius Caesar had some soldiers killed and their heads hung on the Regia (located in the Forum), in the manner of the October Horse, but this seems to have been an isolated incident. See also Jervis 2001: 153.

Pompey later lost his head in Egypt, and although Julius Caesar is said to have been upset by the act, Pompey's son met the same fate as his homonymous father.³⁴ Julius Caesar's clemency, however, did not persist after his death: the proscriptions of the Second Triumvirate brought back the decapitations and public displays of heads eschewed by Julius Caesar.³⁵ The most notable victim of beheading in Roman history was Marcus Tullius Cicero, whose head and hands Marc Antony notoriously nailed to the Rostra.³⁶

These particular episodes of decapitation and display arose during times of great social upheaval and crisis, just as we see in 69 CE. But also, according to Jervis (and I think correctly so), they only happened as the result of a general degeneration or debasement in the overall notion of the inviolability of the Roman elite body. Thus in an account of civil war, we might expect scenes of decapitation commensurate with the historical precedents set by Marius, Sulla, and the Second Triumvirate. Tacitus meets this expectation, but he also takes it a step further, as is evident in his continued narrative of the Year of the Four Emperors: heads roll.

Decapitations Unique to the *Histories*

The remainder of *Histories* 1 involves the revolt of Vitellius in Germany and Gaul (1.51-70) and Otho's actions at Rome (1.71-90), and then concludes with bad omens and disasters (86) and Otho's departure for war with Vitellius (1.90). *Histories* 2 begins in the East, with a description of the Flavians and their activities in Judaea. We get some

³⁴ On Gn. Pompeius Magnus' death, App. *B Civ.* 2.85-87; on Gn. Pompeius' (Pompey's son), Ps.-Caesar *Bell. Hisp.* 39.

³⁵ Scullard 1959: 164, "The triumvirs needed political security and money; they therefore forgot the example of Caesar and remembered Marius and Sulla. They carried out a ruthless proscription, in which they signed the death-warrant of some 300 senators and 2000 knights."

³⁶ Scullard 1959: 164 on the loss of Cicero.

information about Vespasian, Mucianus, and Titus, and Tacitus weighs their eligibility for the principate (2.1-7). Tacitus also elaborates on Titus' trip to the Temple of Venus on Paphos, complete with a digression on the cult's history and rites.

Then Tacitus compares the brewing unrest in Italy and Gaul with former conflicts, specifically the civil wars of the 40s and 30s BCE. He mentions Pompey, Crassus, Brutus and Antony by name, and again calls the current conflict a civil war (*bellum civile*) (2.6).³⁷ As we have seen, in the context of a civil war such as this, the heads of elite Romans were valuable, both monetarily and symbolically. 69 CE was no exception to the long-standing practice of headhunting during wartime—Galba, Vinius, and Piso were just the beginning. Leading up to his account of the First Battle of Bedriacum, Tacitus includes some vignettes of just this kind of headhunting. And here we see the first instances of decapitation in *Histories 2*.

The East was in turmoil because of a rumor that Nero was alive and well (2.8-10). Shipwrecked on Delos, this “False Nero,” possibly either a slave or freedman, actually resembled Nero and was not only impersonating the dead emperor, but also had gathered an army of malcontents to help him gain power. It just so happened that a Roman governor, Calpurnius Asprenas, who was stopping in Delos on his way to Galatia and Pamphylia, apprehended the False Nero and had him executed. Tacitus says that his head was sent to Asia and then to Rome, ostensibly to dispel any more rumors about Nero's resurrection that may have surfaced (2.9):

³⁷ Tac. *Hist.* 2.6.1: *namque olim validissima inter se civium arma in Italia Galliave viribus Occidentis coepta; et Pompeio, Cassio, Bruto, Antonio, quos omnes trans mare secutum est civile bellum, haud prosperi exitus fuerant...et proximo civili bello turbatis aliis inconcussa ibi pax, dein fides erga Galba.*

sed Asprenati cuncta ex fide nuntiata, cuius cohortatione expugnata navis et interfectus quisquis ille erat. caput,³⁸ insigne oculis comaque et torvitate voltus, in Asiam atque inde Romam pervectum est.

But after everything was reported faithfully to Asprenas, the ship was besieged by his cohort and [the False Nero] was killed, whoever he was. The head, remarkable for its eyes and the fierceness of its visage, was conveyed into Asia and from there to Rome.

There is only the briefest mention of this event in the *Histories*, and it does not appear elsewhere in the parallel tradition. If we assume that the False Nero was actually beheaded, as Ash would have us read, then here we have the first in a series of decapitations that continue throughout *Histories 2* and *3* and are absent from the parallel tradition.

Soon after the exploits of the False Nero, Tacitus begins his long narrative of the war between Otho and Vitellius' forces in northern Italy (2.11-56). While Otho was making his way north with a considerable force, and enjoying the good fortune of some early successes, Tacitus digresses on an incident on the isle of Corsica (2.16). Picarius Decumus, the governor of the island, hated Otho and wanted to help the Vitellian cause. Picarius was enlisting soldiers, but the people of Corsica were generally unwilling and unsupportive of Picarius' endeavors. And so Tacitus says that the people rose up against Picarius and he was murdered in a bathhouse when he was most vulnerable. His comrades were also killed and all of their heads were supposedly sent to Otho (2.16):

digressis qui Pacarium frequentabant, nudus et auxilii inops balineis interficitur; trucidati et comites. capita ut hostium ipsi interfectores ad Othonem tulere; neque eos aut Otho praemio

³⁸ *Caput* here is an emendation for the manuscript reading *corpus*, first proposed by Würm 1853: 366 and recently defended by Ash, although most editors retain *corpus*. Ash 2007a: 101 observes that Tacitus' focus on the eyes and the face's appearance bolsters a reading of *caput*. The impracticality of transporting a body for several weeks (as opposed to the more portable head) also supports a reading of *caput*. Ash points out that the episode also serves a structural narrative purpose—as the body/head is taken to Rome, so is the reader in the passage that follows.

affecit aut puniit Vitellius, in multa colluvie rerum maioribus flagitiis permixtos.

When those who hung around Picarius had departed, naked and destitute of help, he was killed in the baths; and his comrades were butchered. The heads, just as with enemies', the killers themselves brought to Otho; and Otho neither granted them a reward nor did Vitellius punish them, since they were all mixed up with greater offences in the vast quagmire of events.

Picarius' revolt is another example of an episode that is unique to Tacitus, and coincidentally involves decapitation. By noting that they took the heads as though they were public enemies (*hostes* as opposed to *inimici*), Tacitus implies that this was not an ordinary way to treat Roman citizens.

Histories 3 also contains occurrences of beheadings that are unique to Tacitus.

Although the characters involved are more famous and better attested than those discussed in Book 2, we still do not find detailed accounts regarding the manner of their deaths in the parallel tradition. The first of these is Fabius Valens. Valens is one of the main characters in the *Histories*: he was an effective legionary commander mentioned in the prologue (1.7),³⁹ an enemy of Galba (1.52) and one of the key supporters of Vitellius (1.74), and even a (suffect) consul in September/October of 69.⁴⁰ Tacitus says Flavian forces captured Valens whose ship had washed ashore after a storm (3.43). Valens' capture was used as a rallying cry for the Flavians (3.44). On 10 December 69 CE, Valens was beheaded at Urbino,⁴¹ and Tacitus alone provides the details of the execution, writing that Flavians displayed Valens' head to Vitellian forces in an effort to demoralize them (3.62):

³⁹ Valens is described as a *legatus promptissimus* at Tac. *Hist.* 1.57.

⁴⁰ For the consuls of 69/70, see Townend 1962.

⁴¹ Modern Collemancio (?). There is some debate whether *Urvinum* is modern-day Urbino or what was known as *Urvinum Hortense*, (Collemancio) argued for as the location of Valens' execution by Wellesley 1972.

isdem diebus Fabius Valens Urbini in custodia interficitur. caput eius Vitellianis cohortibus ostentatum ne quam ultra spem foverent; nam pervasisse in Germanias Valentem et veteres illic novosque exercitus ciere credebant: visa caede in desperationem versi. et Flavianus exercitus immane quantum aucto animo exitium Valentis ut finem belli accepit.

In those same days Fabius Valens, in custody at Urbino, was killed. His head was displayed to the Vitellian cohorts so that they would not cherish any more hope; for they were thinking that Valens had infiltrated the German provinces and was enlisting old and new armies there: When they saw the slaughter they were turned to despair. And the Flavian army received the news of his death with as immensely boosted spirits as though it were the war's end.

Valens' uncomplimentary obituary follows, which has at least one kind remark from Tacitus on Valens' loyalty to Vitellius. Suetonius says nothing about Valens, but we do find Valens supporting Galba in Plutarch,⁴² and there is a short remark about him in Dio.⁴³

Vespasian's older brother, Flavius Sabinus, is beheaded soon after Fabius Valens in Tacitus' narrative. Sabinus had had a long and successful career in Rome: he eventually became urban prefect and held this position for twelve years (Galba had demoted him, but he was reinstated by Vitellius). After the Vitellian forces had burned the Capitolium, where Flavius Sabinus and other Flavian forces had taken refuge, the Vitellians captured and killed Sabinus. Tacitus says that Vitellius opposed Sabinus' execution, but the mob was clamoring for his death (3.74):

Sabinus et Atticus onerati catenis et ad Vitellium ducti nequaquam infesto sermone vultuque excipiuntur, frementibus qui ius caedis et praemia navatae operae petebant. clamore a proximis orto sordida pars plebis supplicium Sabini exposcit, minas adulationesque miscet. stantem pro gradibus Palatii Vitellium et preces parantem pervicere ut absisteret: tum

⁴² Plut. Vit. *Galb.* 10.3.

⁴³ Cass. Dio 64.10.1 on Fabius Valens' avarice.

confossum laceratumque et absciso capite truncum corpus Sabini in Gemonias trahunt.

Sabinus and Atticus, burdened with chains and led to Vitellius are in vain received by hostile speech and words, while others were shouting, demanding the “right of slaughter” and the reward for their vigorous action. After a clamor arose from those nearby, the unwashed masses demanded Sabinus’ punishment, mixing threats with cringing flattery. They got Vitellius, who was standing in front of the Palatine’s steps and readying prayers, to stand aside: then they dragged Sabinus’ mangled body—beaten, cut, and with its head cut off—onto the Gemonian Steps.

Tacitus describes him as an important and distinguished member of the Flavian family, and his obituary is favorable (3.75).

The parallel tradition provides us with more information about Sabinus, but little about how he died. Suetonius writes about Flavius Sabinus in three of his biographies,⁴⁴ and he implies that Sabinus and other Flavians were killed in the destruction of the Capitolium while Vitellius looked on from his banquet.⁴⁵ Plutarch does not tell us anything in addition to the reasons for Otho’s appointment of Sabinus to urban prefect.⁴⁶ Dio reminds us of the Capitolium’s destruction and Sabinus’ subsequent arrest, but there is nothing about what happened after he was sent to Vitellius.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ The citations are Suet. *Vit.* 15.3; *Vesp.* 1.3; *Dom.* 1.2: Suet. *Vesp.* 1.3 concerns Sabinus as urban prefect; Suet. *Dom.* 1.2 relates Sabinus’ involvement in Domitian’s escape from the burning Capitolium.

⁴⁵ Suet. *Vit.* 15.3: *Rursus interpellante milite ac populo et ne deficeret hortante omnemque operam suam certatim pollicente, animum resumpsit [Vitellius] Sabinumque et reliquos Flavianos nihil iam metuentis vi subita in Capitolium compulit succensoque templo Iovis Optimi Maximi oppressit, cum et proelium et incendium e Tiberiana prospiceret domo inter epulas.*

⁴⁶ Plut. *Otho* 5.2.

⁴⁷ Cass. Dio 64.17 [Xiphilinus]: *τόν τε Σαβίνον καὶ τὸν Ἄττικὸν συλλαβόντες πρὸς τὸν Οὐιτέλλιον ἔπεμψαν.*

Although in his account of Galba's death Tacitus retains the emphasis on decapitation that was part of the common tradition, in the remainder of *Historiae* 1-3 Tacitus develops decapitation into a *leitmotif* which has no parallel in the other sources. He does this not only by the inclusion of minor unparalleled episodes (False Nero and Picarius), but also by the introduction of the motif into the accounts of more important figures (Fabius Valens and Flavius Sabinus), who do not feature in the parallel sources. Tacitus even introduces the decapitation motif into an especially celebrated and well-attested historical episode.

Of all the many deaths in 69 CE, perhaps the most famous is emperor Otho's suicide. It is widely known from the parallel tradition that Otho fell on his sword. What is interesting and unique about Tacitus' version is the way he comments on Otho's funeral, worth quoting here in full (2.49):

vesperascente die sitim haustu gelidae aquae sedavit. tum adlatis pugionibus duobus, cum utrumque pertemptasset, alterum capiti subdidit. et explorato iam profectos amicos, noctem quietam, utque adfirmatur, non insomnem egit: luce prima in ferrum incubuit. ad gemitum morientis ingressi liberti servique et Plotius Firmus praetorii praefectus unum vulnus invenere. funus maturatum; ambitiosis id precibus petierat ne amputaretur caput ludibrio futurum.

When the day was turning to dusk, he quenched his thirst with a draught of cold water. Then when two daggers were brought out, after he had tested both, he hid one under his head. And after he discovered that his friends had already departed, he spent a quiet night, as they affirm, not a sleepless one: at first light he fell upon his sword. The freedmen, slaves, and Plotius Firmus (the praetorian prefect), after having entered at the groan of the dying man, found a single wound. The funeral was hurried; that was something he had sought with earnest prayers so that his head would not be cut off and mocked.

Ash translates *alterum capiti subdidit* as “he put one under his pillow,” because she appropriately sees similarities between Otho’s suicide and Cato the Younger’s.⁴⁸ Tacitus, however, pointedly does not write *pulvinus* here, and this omission further underscores Tacitus’ emphasis on head imagery. In other words, it is not merely as Ash suggests, “[Tacitus] avoids *pulvinus*, ‘pillow’, perhaps too lowly for both the grandeur of the suicide and the genre of historiography.”⁴⁹ Tacitus purposely uses *caput* here instead of *pulvinus*, perhaps suggesting that Otho put the dagger (a symbol of *imperium*) under his head because his head was the metaphorical seat of his power.

Tacitus’ comment about Otho’s fear of decapitation is lacking in the parallel tradition, which is similar in all other respects.⁵⁰ For example, Suetonius quickly narrates the same sequence of events, even using some of the same vocabulary as Tacitus:⁵¹ Otho quenches his thirst with cold water (*post hoc sedata siti gelidae aquae potione*); he tests the daggers’ points (*arripuit duos pugiones et explorata utriusque acie*) and places one under his pillow (*alterum pulvino subdidisset*).⁵² Suetonius’ Otho also kills himself with one blow and brings people running in with his final groans. Finally, Suetonius says that his funeral was rushed,

⁴⁸ Ash 2007a: 211-13. On Cato’s suicide, see Caes. *B Afr.* 88; Plut. *Vit. Cat. Mi.* 70.9; App. *B Civ.* 2.99; Cass. Dio 43.11.

⁴⁹ Ash 2007a: 212.

⁵⁰ Murison 1991: 126-27: “[Suetonius] and Tacitus and Plutarch are all using the same basic source but each has at least one ‘subsidiary’ version...This gives rise to minor variations of detail, though there is no major disagreement.”

⁵¹ Suet. *Otho* 11.2.

⁵² Suetonius may be evoking a parallel with the suicide of Nero, who also tested a pair of daggers (Suet. *Ner.* 49.2). Suetonius says that some hailed Otho as if he were another Nero (Suet. *Otho* 7).

just as he had ordered (*exanimatus est et celeriter, nam ita praeceperat, funeratus*), but Suetonius does not tell us *why* Otho wanted his funeral handled so quickly.⁵³

In contrast to Suetonius' brief account, Plutarch treats Otho's funeral in detail.⁵⁴ He says that when Otho committed suicide, servants and soldiers alike were mourning profusely. Plutarch expresses admiration for Otho's followers' dedication and loyalty, some of whom acted as pallbearers, others who killed themselves. Plutarch gives two reasons for the suicides of Otho's men: they either felt they owed something to Otho, or they were worried about what the Vitellians might do to them. Plutarch then describes Otho's tomb, which he claims to have seen upon a visit to Brixillum.⁵⁵ It is noteworthy that here Plutarch says they constructed the tomb modestly in order to avoid the enemy's envy. Plutarch does not say, however, that it was Otho himself who ordered his tomb and epitaph to be done discreetly—we must infer that fact from other sources. Plutarch does insist that some of Otho's followers chose death over punishment by their conquerors, but that still does not explain Otho's own suicide, hasty burial, and restrained monument.

Like most of the excerpts we have from Dio, his account of Otho's funeral is short.⁵⁶ In Dio's version, Otho gave a speech and then burnt all letters that might anger Vitellius. When they saw that Otho had committed suicide, his soldiers buried him and some also killed themselves. Nothing is said about the tomb or the haste of the burial in Dio's summary.

⁵³ Suet. *Otho* 11.2: "He died and quickly, for so he had ordered it, he was given funeral rites."

⁵⁴ Plut. *Otho* 17-18.

⁵⁵ Plut. *Otho* 18.1: κρύψαντες δὲ τῇ γῆ τὰ λείψανα τοῦ Ὀθωνος οὔτε μεγέθει σήματος οὔτ' ἐπιγραφῆς ὄγκω τὸν τάφον ἐποίησαν ἐπίφθονον. εἶδον δὲ ἐν Βριξιλλῶνι γενόμενος καὶ μνήμα μέτριον καὶ τὴν ἐπιγραφὴν οὕτως ἔχουσαν, εἰ μεταφρασθεῖη, Δηλώσει Μάρκου Ὀθωνος.

⁵⁶ Cass. Dio 64.15.

It is clear, then, that Tacitus deliberately introduced the decapitation motif into this episode, even though it had no part in the common tradition. Given the fate of Galba and his associates at Otho's hands, it is psychologically apt that Otho fear similar treatment. With his description of the placing of the dagger, Tacitus even sneaks in a reference to heads before getting to Otho's fear. And so the most elaborate treatment of heads being desired, abused, and mocked was the day that Otho became emperor; on the day that Otho ceases to be emperor, he fears that the same will happen to him.

Metaphorical Decapitations

As have seen so far, there is considerable evidence that the imagery of decapitation and its placement is not merely accidental. It is a subtle motif, but one that becomes more meaningful and apparent as we move from the realm of literal decapitations into that of metaphorical ones. It is appropriate now to return to the prologue of *Histories* 1, where Tacitus provides readers with the first use of the word *caput*.⁵⁷ We will see that most metaphorical uses of *caput* in the *Histories* refer to places or things, but the first appearance of *caput* refers to a man: Nymphidius Sabinus.⁵⁸ We might expect the use of *caput* to refer to Nymphidius' actual head, but Tacitus uses *caput* metaphorically instead:

postquam neque dari donativum sub nomine Galbae
promissum neque magnis meritis ac praemiis eundem in pace
quem in bello locum praeventamque gratiam intellegit apud
principem a legionibus factum, pronus ad novas res scelere
insuper Nymphidii Sabini praefecti imperium sibi molientis
agitatur. et Nymphidius quidem in ipso conatu oppressus, sed
quamvis capite defectionis ablato manebat plerisque militum

⁵⁷ Tac. *Hist.* 1.5.

⁵⁸ Tac. *Ann.* 15.72.2: Nymphidius receives a biography, describing Nymphidius' appearance and discussing the debate about his parentage. The passage has a lacuna, however, but it seems to refer to Nymphidius' part in the events of 6 CE (Furneaux 1907: 411).

conscientia, nec deerant sermones senium atque avaritiam Galbae increpantium.

After [the *miles urbanus*] understood that neither the donative promised in Galba's name would be given, nor that there was the same place in peace as there was in war for great recompense and rewards, and that the time for gaining favor had passed, leaning toward revolution [the *miles urbanus*] was riled moreover by the criminal behavior of Nymphidius Sabinus who was striving to usurp the imperium for himself. And indeed Nymphidius was thwarted in his very attempt, but although the head of the revolt was removed there remained the consciousness in many of the soldiers, and there was no lack of conversation from those who were critical of Galba's old age and avarice.

We do not learn much from the parallel tradition about Nymphidius Sabinus or his fate. Plutarch provides the most extensive information about the man.⁵⁹ From Plutarch we learn about Nymphidius' life and his ambitions for the principate. Plutarch even entertains a debate over his parentage.⁶⁰ Nymphidius tried to take Nero's place after his death, and he was in direct opposition to Galba's principate. So Plutarch tells us that Nymphidius met his end when he was brought before the Praetorian Guard to give a speech, but was killed instead. We only learn that he was "cut down" (*σφάττεται*) and his body dragged around.⁶¹ Suetonius also tells us that Nymphidius was the main opposition to Galba in the city of Rome after Nero's suicide.⁶² In the same way, Dio refers to Nymphidius' resistance to Galba in Rome, but contains an odd reference: Dio says that Galba was not himself guilty of violent behavior, but that he allowed his underlings too much license, and that he was ignorant of

⁵⁹ Plut. Vit. *Galb.* 2.1, 8-9, 11.1, 13-14.

⁶⁰ According to Plutarch, Nymphidius claimed that he was Caligula's son so as to be a legitimate heir to Nero, but Plutarch says that he was more likely the child of the gladiator Martianus (Plut. Vit. *Galb.* 9).

⁶¹ Plut. Vit. *Galb.* 14.6: καὶ ταύτην μὲν ἐδέξατο πρὸ αὐτοῦ θυρεῷ Σεπτίμιος, ἄλλων δὲ γυμνοῖς ξίφεσιν ἐπιφερομένων φυγῶν καὶ διωχθεῖς ἐν οἰκίῳ στρατιώτου σφάττεται. καὶ τὸν νεκρὸν εἰς μέσον ἐλκύσαντες καὶ περιβαλόντες κυκλῖδα θέαμα τοῖς βουλομένοις μεθ' ἡμέραν παρέσχον.

⁶² Suet. *Galb.* 11.

their actions. Then Dio (as epitomized by Xiphilinus) tells us that Galba's ignorance cost Nymphidius and Fonteius Capito their lives, using the verb ἐξεφρόνησαν—literally, “they were out of their minds [about this].”⁶³

The specific details of Nymphidius Sabinus’ death have escaped us, but I would argue that Tacitus’ use of *capite defectionis ablato* in reference to Nymphidius is deliberately evoking the decapitation metaphor. Nymphidius Sabinus at once represents the deposed leader of the rebellion against Galba and a metaphorical decapitated head. By placing this reference in the preface of the *Histories*, Tacitus gives the reader an indication of his programmatic use of decapitation as a metaphor throughout the work. In the following section of this paper, I will show how Tacitus, by using *caput* metaphorically, is adhering to an established convention in Latin literature.

The Use of *Caput* in Latin Literature

There was an extensive set of uses for *caput* in Latin, and it was used in much the same way we use “head” to refer to different, usually prominent, things. Literal and metaphorical uses of *caput* were quite common. That is, *caput* not only meant the literal head of an animal, but also, by metonymy, could mean a person or their mind. *Caput* could also refer to certain inanimate objects that resembled actual heads, and even could allude to serious matters that threatened a person’s life (e.g. capital punishment).

The *Thesaurus Linguae Latinae* (*TLL*) says that *caput* could refer metaphorically to a leading person (*homo princeps*), and specifically to the top magistrate of the republic, the

⁶³ Cass. Dio 64.2.3.

leader of an army, or the *princeps* himself.⁶⁴ We can trace *caput* meaning “leading person” as far back as the plays of Plautus.⁶⁵ The scholiast Servius Auctus on *Aeneid* 11.361 verifies this meaning: *quia qui ductor et princeps rei gestae fuerat, caput a veteribus dicebatur* (“Because whoever had been the leader and *princeps* of their accomplishments was called the ‘head’ by the old ones.”)⁶⁶ Ovid uses *caput* this way in the *Tristia*, Lucan describes Pompey as *caput orbis* (“head of the world”) in his *Bellum Civile*,⁶⁷ it occurs in the later prose of Cicero, and frequently in Livy.⁶⁸ *Caput* clearly refers to a general political “head” in Cicero’s *Pro Murena*, where Catiline says that the republic has two bodies, one feeble with a weak head and the other strong without a head.⁶⁹ In the *Histories*, Tacitus follows this same tradition of using *caput* to mean political leadership. Emperor Otho, in a speech reproaching the troops for an insurrection, gives the title of *caput imperii* to the senate (1.84.3):⁷⁰

Nec illas adversus senatum voces ullus usquam exercitus
 audiat. caput imperii et decora omnium provinciarum ad
 poenam vocare non hercule illi, quos cum maxime Vitellius in
 nos ciet, Germani audeant.

And no army should ever hear those words against the senate.
 Not, by Hercules, would those Germans, whom Vitellius at this
 very moment is driving against us, dare to call for the

⁶⁴ *TLL* s. v. *caput* 4.A.3.

⁶⁵ Plaut. *Asin.* 728: *ego caput huic argento fui hodie reperiundo*; Plaut. *Bacch.* 829: *scelerum caput*.

⁶⁶ *TLL* s. v. *caput* 4.A.3. Verg. *Aen.* 11.361: *caput horum et causa malorum* (“He was the head of things and the cause of evils”).

⁶⁷ Ov. *Tr.* 3.5.46: *Caesareum caput est, quod caput orbis erat*; Livy 6.3.1: *caput rei Romanae Camillus erat*; Luc. *summa caputque orbis Pompeius*.

⁶⁸ Cic. *Flacc.* 42: *caput est omnium Graecorum concitandorum*; Livy 35.36.7: *ut caput agenda rei, regii generis aliquem...assumendum*. This is also the *TLL* entry that lists the Nymphidius Sabinus passage (Tac. *Hist.* 1.5).

⁶⁹ Cic. *Mur.* 51: *Tum enim dixit duo corpora esse rei publicae, unum debile infirmo capite, alterum firmum sine capite; huic, si ita de se meritum esset, caput se vivo non defuturum*.

⁷⁰ Damon 2003: 269 and Chilver 1979: 151 note how this speech seems like it could have been given by Cicero during the republic.

punishment of the head of the empire and the honor of all the provinces.

Another use of *caput* describes places, such as locations that excel others for some reason or at some moment in time (*de locis inter cetera aliquo momento excellentibus*).⁷¹ Thus *caput* can mean a foremost (capital) city. Both Cicero and Cornelius Nepos call specific cities *capita*,⁷² and Livy regularly uses *caput* to name cities that are capitals of their respective regions. For example, Antium, Capua, Cirta, and Pergamum are all named *capita* by Livy.⁷³ Tacitus draws on this tradition when he uses *caput* for Caesarea and Antioch, both provincial capitals: *discessere Mucianus Antiocham, Vespasianus Caesaream: illa Syriae, hoc Iudaeae caput est* (“Mucianus left for Antioch, Vespasian for Caesarea: the former is the head of Syria, the latter the head of Judaea.”)⁷⁴ In *Histories* 5, Tacitus likewise calls Jerusalem *caput*, presumably as the chief city of the Judaeans people.⁷⁵ In some ways, the most pointed usage of *caput* as capital occurs in *Histories* 1, where in describing Caecina’s march to Rome from Germania, Tacitus writes that he was provoked into fighting the Helvetii (1.67).⁷⁶ After Caecina had routed the Helvetian forces, he attacked their capital at Aventicum (modern Avenches),⁷⁷ killing many of its leaders and forcing them to beg Vitellius for mercy (1.68-69):

⁷¹ *TLL* s. v. *caput* 4.B.4. Cic. *Verr.* 4.47: *quod caput est rei frumentariae campus Leontinus*; Livy 6.14.10 *fundum in Veienti, caput patrimonii*.

⁷² Cic. *Att.* 15.4.8: *Eranam...quod erat Amani caput cepimus*; Nep. *Epam.* 10.4: *Thebas caput fuisse totius Graecae*; Livy 21.33.11: *castellum inde, quod caput eius regionis erat...capit*.

⁷³ Antium: Livy 6.9.1; Capua: Livy 23.10.2; Cirta: Livy 30.12.3; Pergamum: Livy 37.18.3.

⁷⁴ Tac. *Hist.* 2.78.

⁷⁵ Tac. *Hist.* 5.8: *Magna pars Iudaeae vicis dispergitur, habent et oppida; Hierosolyma genti caput*.

⁷⁶ See Morgan 1994:103-125 for a good discussion of Valens and Caecina’s marches to Rome.

⁷⁷ See Chilver 1979: 131 for location of Aventicum and its identification with modern Avenches.

cumque dirutis omnibus Aventicum gentis caput infesto
agmine peteretur, missi qui dederent civitatem, et deditio
accepta.

And when everything was destroyed, Aventicum, the head of
the nation was sought by the hostile force, men were sent to
surrender the state, and surrender was accepted.

Rome, however, is perhaps the most obvious *caput* of them all. As early as Ovid we can find clear references to Rome itself as *caput*:⁷⁸ for instance, in the last poem of *Amores* 1, Ovid says that Rome will be *caput triumphati orbis* (“head of the triumphed [over] world”), and Ovid often describes Rome this way elsewhere in his works.⁷⁹ The Augustan origin of *Roma caput* in the Augustan period is borne out by the *TLL* entry and is common in later authors.⁸⁰ In Livy’s first book, for example, Proculus Julius says that Romulus (after his apotheosis) came down from heaven and predicted the Romans’ illustrious future—that Rome would become the *caput orbis terrarum*, the capital (“head”) of the world.⁸¹ Later Livy says that under king Servius Tullius Rome became recognized as the capital of Latium.⁸² Similarly, Tacitus equates the *caput imperii* with the Rome itself in an (indirect) speech of Suetonius Paulinus at *Histories* 2.32:⁸³

contra ipsi omnia opulenta et fida, Pannoniam Moesiam
Dalmatiam Orientem cum integris exercitibus, Italiam et caput
rerum urbem senatumque et populum, numquam obscura

⁷⁸ *TLL* s. v. *caput* 4.4 refers specifically to Rome as *caput*.

⁷⁹ Ov. *Am.* 1.15.26: *Roma triumphati dum caput orbis erit*; see also *Met.* 15.435 (*inmensi caput orbis erit*); 15.736 (*iamque caput rerum, Romanam intraverat urbem*); *Fast.* 5.93 (*hic, ubi nunc Roma est, orbis caput*).

⁸⁰ See also Nicolet 1991: 192 and 204n9 on the Augustan origin of this metaphor.

⁸¹ Livy 1.16.7.

⁸² Livy 1.45.3: *Ea erat confessio caput rerum Romam esse, de quo totiens armis certatum fuerat*. Ogilvie 1965: 183n45.3 insists that *caput rerum Romam esse* is “a phrase redolent of Augustan ethos.”

⁸³ Note that Tacitus does not actually use the word *imperium* here, and also how Paulinus directly juxtaposes Rome as *caput* with the soldiers’ *corpora*.

nomina, etiam <si> aliquando obumbrentur; publicas
privatasque opes et immensam pecuniam, inter civiles
discordias ferro validiorem; corpora militum aut Italiae sueta
aut aestibus...

On their own side, all was different. There were rich and devoted resources everywhere. They had at their disposal Pannonia, Moesia, Dalmatia and the East, with armies fresh and unimpaired; Italy and the city which was the [head] of the world; the Roman senate and people – whose reputation always shown out, even if at times they were overshadowed. They had public and private resources, and boundless riches, which are stronger in civil dissensions than the sword; soldiers whose [bodies] were accustomed to other hot climates...⁸⁴

Not only was the entire city of Rome identified as a *caput* by ancient authors, but there is a tradition that the city itself had a *caput*, the Capitolium.⁸⁵ In antiquity, the name Capitolium was thought to derive etymologically from *Caput Oli* or *Olis*, referring to the head of a man discovered by those laying foundations for the Temple of Jupiter Optimus Maximus on the Capitoline hill.⁸⁶ In the version of the story recorded by Pliny the Elder, after the head was found, an embassy was sent to Etruria to consult a famous seer (*vates*) named Olenus Calenus. Olenus drew a temple on the ground, and pointing at it, asked the ambassadors if that was where they had found the head. Pliny says that Olenus was trying to transfer the good omen's power from Rome to Etruria. The ambassadors, however, replied that the head was found in Rome, and thus foiled Olenus' plan.⁸⁷ Livy tells another version

⁸⁴ Wellesley 1964: 80-81.

⁸⁵ See Gowers 1995 for her discussion of Rome as a human body, complete with a head (Capitolium) and excretory system (Cloaca Maxima).

⁸⁶ Plin. *HN* 28.15; Serv. *ad Aen.* 8.345; Arn. 6.7.

⁸⁷ Ogilvie 1965: 211n55.5 discusses this story.

of this story, and expands on the premonition of Rome's future greatness as a world capital, and establishes the Capitolium as the *caput* of Rome and its empire.⁸⁸

Hoc perpetuitatis auspicio accepto secutum aliud magnitudinem imperii portendens prodigium est: caput humanum integra facie aperientibus fundamenta templi dicitur apparuisse. Quae visa species haud per ambages arcem eam imperii caputque rerum fore portendebat, idque ita cecinere vates, quique in urbe erant quosque ad eam rem consultandam ex Etruria acciverant.

When the auspices of perpetuity had been received, another prodigy followed which was foretelling the greatness of the empire: a human head with its face intact is said to have appeared to those opening the foundations of the temple. Its appearance unambiguously portended that the citadel would be the head of an empire and its affairs, and so the seers sang about it, those who were in the city and those whom they had summoned from Etruria to consult about the matter.

The aforementioned passages show an established literary tradition of *caput* used metaphorically. By Tacitus' time it was conventional to refer to places and leaders as *capita*, Rome was recognized as the *caput* of its empire, and the Capitolium was commonly considered the *caput* of Rome. As we can see here, references to *capita* such as these powerfully suggest that it might be fruitful to search for a connection between literal and metaphorical decapitations in Tacitus' *Histories*. Tacitus has used *caput* to mean both capital cities (Aventicum, Rome) and their governing bodies (i.e. the senate). I would argue that Tacitus deliberately weaves together this traditional, metaphorical use of *caput* with the decapitation motif I have already explored. For example, we might think of *caput Aventicum* as metaphorically "decapitated" after it was subdued by Vitellian forces, insofar as its leading men were removed from power (1.68-69). Above all, Rome was decapitated at various times throughout the course of 69 CE, when its rulers were ousted—some of them literally

⁸⁸ Livy 1.55.5-6. Ogilvie 1965: 211-212, see also Ash 2007b on the personification of Rome (specifically, Ash 2007b: 214n8 where she also cites Fabius Pictor and Valerius Antias as Livy's sources for this story).

beheaded. The anarchy of 69 CE is emphasized by the recurring decapitation imagery, and draws into focus one constant victim throughout the *Histories*: Rome. Rome has suffered continually from civil unrest, and it is also Rome that stands most prominently Tacitus' emotional climax of *Histories* 3—the destruction of the Capitolium.

The Decapitation of Rome

Tacitus' decapitation imagery comes to a fitting climax with the clash of the Flavians and Vitellians in Rome and the burning of the Capitolium. For the grand finale of 69 CE and the *Histories*' first triad of books, we witness the death of Vitellius, the passive, gluttonous head of state, and the destruction of the Capitolium, the majestic, ancient symbol of Rome. According to Tacitus, Vitellius had occupied Rome, and the Flavian faction, led by Flavius Sabinus, was trying to negotiate peace with him (3.65). The peace talks were unsuccessful, mainly because the Vitellians and Vitellius himself were concerned about their future under a Flavian regime (3.66).⁸⁹ Moreover, Vitellius had his family to worry about—a young son, wife, and mother (3.67). Tacitus says that familial concerns weighed heavily on Vitellius' mind, so much so that he tried to abdicate, but the consul and the people refused his feeble attempt at resignation and forced him to return to the Palatine. Here Tacitus stresses Vitellius' absolute lack of power: *tum consilii inops in Palatium redit* (3.68). Flavius Sabinus' supporters urged him to seize control of the city because they thought that Vitellius had relinquished his power (3.69). On 18 December 69 CE, Vitellian troops clashed with Flavians near the Pool of Fundanus and forced the Flavians to seek the protection of the Capitoline citadel.

⁸⁹ Tacitus compares Vitellius' fate under Vespasian to Pompey's under Caesar and Antony's under Augustus.

On the following day, the Vitellians began their siege of the Capitoline. The Flavians fought back. Flavius Sabinus tried to fortify their position using a makeshift barricade of statuary. The Capitoline caught fire, engulfing the Capitolium in flames and reducing it to ashes (3.71).⁹⁰ Tacitus personifies the Capitolium by giving it an obituary, just as he does his major characters.⁹¹ He opines that the temple's destruction was the worst disaster ever to befall the city of Rome and its people (*Id facinus post conditam urbem luctuosissimum foedissimumque rei publicae populi Romani accidit*) (3.72): it was all the more catastrophic because the Capitolium, the symbol of the empire (*pignus imperii*), was destroyed not by a foreign enemy (*nullo externo hoste*), but by the madness of the *principes* (*furore principum*). Tacitus admits that the Capitolium had once before been destroyed during a civil war (*civili bello*), but then stresses that in that case it was burned by "private deceit" (*privata fraude*), not openly besieged and burned in broad daylight (*palam obsessum, palam incensum*). Following the destruction of the Capitolium, Flavius Sabinus lost his head (3.74). Then on the evening of that same day, the Flavian reinforcements finally arrived, too late to save Sabinus or the Capitolium (3.79).

The final chapters of *Histories* 3 involve Vitellius' downfall and death (3.80-86). Tacitus says that the people of Rome watched the Flavians and Vitellians fight as if they were at the gladiatorial games, and compares the spectacle to the massacres witnessed under Sulla and Cinna (3.83). Meanwhile, Vitellius found himself in an eerily empty palace, where he was eventually captured and brought before the people for execution (3.84). The Flavians took Vitellius to the city center, where, as Tacitus reminds us, Galba and Flavius Sabinus

⁹⁰ Ash 2007b: 231-232 describes the Capitolium as "suicidal" because of the way that it seems to take on a life of its own and draw the flames into itself (*aquila...traxerunt flammam alueruntque*). For the parallel tradition on the Capitoline's destruction see especially Suet. *Vit.* 15.3, *Dom.* 1.2; Cass. Dio 64.17.3; Joseph. *BJ* 4.649.

⁹¹ See Ash 2007b generally for the personification of the Capitolium.

were decapitated (3.85). There an unruly mob murdered the emperor. Tacitus accords Vitellius an obituary, just as he does for the other emperors (3.86).

Through the account of the Capitolium's destruction and its subsequent historical death-notice, we can see most clearly Tacitus' decapitation metaphor at work. Two major characters lose their lives at the end of *Histories* 3: Vitellius and Flavius Sabinus, and (strangely enough) the Capitolium (i.e. Rome itself). As we have seen, Tacitus explicitly reports that Flavius Sabinus was beheaded, but leaves vague the exact manner of Vitellius' death. Cassius Dio, on the other hand, specifically states that Vitellius was beheaded and that his head was carried all over town.⁹² So why might Tacitus leave out this important detail, especially when we have seen the decapitation motif used so much throughout *Histories* 1-3? So far in the narrative emperors have either physically lost their heads (Galba/Piso) or have worried about decapitation (Otho), but here at the climax of the first three books, when we might reasonably expect an elaborate description of Vitellius' decapitation, instead Tacitus surprisingly avoids the motif. I would argue that, by suppressing the expected reference to Vitellius' decapitation, Tacitus throws into relief the destruction of the Capitol, which functions as a metaphorical decapitation of Rome and the empire itself.⁹³ The three successive emperors are each weaker and worse than his predecessor, with Vitellius the most passive and ineffectual of them all; his death is of little consequence. It is instead the survival of Rome itself, as personified in its "head," that now seems to be at stake.

⁹² Cass. Dio 64.21.2 [Xiphilinus]: *τήν τε κεφαλὴν αὐτοῦ ἀποτεμόντες κατὰ πᾶσαν τὴν πόλιν περιήγαγον.*

⁹³ I am not the first to see the destruction of the Capitolium as a "decapitation" of Rome. Ash 2007b: 217 discusses Rome's decapitation, focusing on Rome's buildings as important moralizing characters in *Histories* 3.

Heads and the Structure of the *Histories*

Critics and commentators often note the careful structuring of the *Histories* and of Tacitus' works in general. Sir Ronald Syme calls *Histories* 1 "exemplary for architecture," and also notes how "the historian [Tacitus], by grouping events, by managing separate narratives, by variety and art of transition...demonstrates that he has the subject under perfect control."⁹⁴ The "architecture" or structure is important to the narrative's meaning. Indeed Syme observes: "Narrative is the essence of history."⁹⁵ Norma Miller has also demonstrated, using *Histories* 1.1-50 as a case study, the complex structure of Tacitus' narrative.⁹⁶ In her analysis of this historical episode from *Histories* 1, Miller writes that, "Tacitus is using the story to invite reflections on human life and behavior,"⁹⁷ arguing that Tacitus uses the structure of his work to communicate his own historical analysis of events.⁹⁸ Moreover, there is evidence that Tacitus often uses metaphors as part of his narrative structure. In more recent commentaries on Tacitus' style, both Damon and Ash have discussed Tacitus' predilection for metaphor and its use: Tacitus uses metaphors to structure his works, sometimes employing them on a grand scale.⁹⁹ As Ash notes, the metaphors that Tacitus

⁹⁴ Syme 1958b: 191.

⁹⁵ Syme 1958b: 193.

⁹⁶ Miller 1977.

⁹⁷ Miller 1977: 21.

⁹⁸ Miller 1977: 22 "But even more important than the appreciation of technical skill, is the realization that the narrative presentation is often a reflection of historical judgement."

⁹⁹ Damon 2003: 15, "...what in other prose authors would be ornaments introduced in suitable settings T. uses as basic building blocks." Ash 2007a: 17, "An especially rich feature of T.'s language is his fondness for metaphor. The scale can range from a single word to an elaborate and interlocking set of images."

employs “often have an interpretive bearing on the historical event being described and are not simply decorative.”¹⁰⁰

These scholars’ observations on Tacitus’ narrative techniques and use of metaphor are pertinent to our discussion of the decapitation motif, because an examination of the motif on a broader scale reveals recurring structural patterns in *Histories* 1-3. As I have already noted, the first use of *caput* meaning “leader” comes from the preface (1.5), where we learn about Galba’s suppression of Nymphidius Sabinus’ revolt, perhaps a latent metaphor for decapitation. The next reference to decapitations occurs in the scene of Galba’s murder, approximately halfway into *Histories* 1, and in many ways at its emotional climax. After Tacitus reminisces about civil wars past (1.50), the scene abruptly shifts to the German theater and Vitellius’ revolt (1.51). So we find decapitation located conspicuously at the climax of Book 1, followed by a digression on civil war and a change in subject. Given then that *Histories* 1.12-50 forms a single narrative and also a structural unit, the emphasis of the last chapters on the death and beheading of Galba serves to mark the end of that unit and to function almost as a punctuation mark, so to speak, in the overall syntax of the book.

Histories 2 mirrors the structure of *Histories* 1: *Histories* 2 begins with its own preface about the Flavians in the East, and then Tacitus continues in quick succession with the decapitations of both the False Nero (2.8-10) and Picarius (2.16).¹⁰¹ Later, before Otho’s disastrous loss at the First Battle of Bedriacum (2.39-45), Tacitus digresses again on civil war (2.37-8). Then about midway through *Histories* 2, again at the emotional climax of the Book, is Otho’s suicide and his apprehension about his own decapitation (2.46-51). Not only

¹⁰⁰ Ash 2007a: 17.

¹⁰¹ This assumes that Tacitus wrote about the False Nero’s head (and not his body). Even if Tacitus did not write *caput*, we still have mention of Picarius’ decapitation near the beginning of *Histories* 2.

are the emperors' deaths parallel, but both contain decapitation references—one is a literal bloodbath, the other imaginary. After both the deaths of Galba and Otho, Tacitus' attention turns to the Vitellian camp (1.57). As Vitellius, the passive glutton, makes his way toward Rome, Tacitus marks his journey by an increasing decline in his effectiveness as a leader and the troops' subsequent slovenliness and disorder (reflecting the character of their captain) (2.62). Here again we can see a structural unit from *Histories* 2.11-56 involving the campaigns of Othonians and Vitellians in north Italy. This unit ends with its emphasis on Otho's fear of decapitation, his suicide, and funeral.

Histories 3 has a similar structure to that of the first two books, although it is not exactly the same. Books 1 and 2 include prefaces that mention decapitation, but there are no beheadings at the beginning of *Histories* 3. Instead there is the sack of Cremona (3.33-34), which foreshadows the upcoming sack of the Capitolium. Both accounts involve the destruction of cities and both Cremona and the Capitolium receive obituaries. Tacitus stresses their similarities by offering eulogies of these venerable Roman locales that both stood as bulwarks against foreign enemies, and both perished in civil wars. Cremona was built to protect Romans against invaders from the north, including Hannibal and Gauls (*ingruente in Italiam Annibale, propugnaculum adversus Gallos trans Padum agentis et si qua alia vis per Alpis rueret*), and it had been untouched by foreign wars, only to be destroyed in civil ones (*bellis externis intacta, civilibus infelix*); the Capitolium had survived attacks of Etruscans and Gauls (*non Porsenna dedita urbe neque Galli capta temerare potuissent*), only to be burned by the *principes* in civil war (3.72). Vespasian took part in the restoration of both Cremona (*Vespasianus hortabatur*) and the Capitolium.

At the midpoint of *Histories* 3, where the previous two books lead us to expect a dramatic beheading, Tacitus instead digresses on fratricide (3.51) and refers to the atrocities of Cinna during the Social War (3.83). The absence of an expected reference to imperial decapitation at the center of *Histories* 3 greatly stresses the Capitolium's destruction (3.71-72) and deemphasizes the pathetic and anti-climactic death of Vitellius that follows (3.86). After three books containing fairly pervasive decapitation imagery, the motif reaches its climax toward the end (rather than at the middle) of *Histories* 3. The destruction of the Capitol, the metaphorical decapitation of Rome, serves as a fitting end to Tacitus' treatment of the civil war and the so-called Year of the Four Emperors, and it also serves as an appropriate place to stop using the motif, which is indeed what Tacitus seems to have done.

Tacitus drops the decapitation motif almost completely in *Histories* 4.¹⁰² A reference to literal decapitation recurs once: Regulus is accused in a senate meeting of having bitten Piso's severed head (4.42). Tacitus also uses *caput* metaphorically three times: at 4.69 the legions are hanging like the Sword of Damocles over the "head" of the rebellious Treviri and Lingones (*super caput*); in the same passage, one of the leaders of the Remi, Julius Auspex, even asks, *quod bello caput?* ("What will be the head[quarters] in war?"); lastly, as already mentioned, Tacitus dubs Jerusalem the *caput Iudaeae*.¹⁰³

Instead of decapitation as a main focus of *Histories* 4, there is an increased emphasis on the restoration of Rome: Tacitus says that the Flavians' priorities were the Capitolium and the senate (4.4). The remainder of the first half of *Histories* 4 concerns these religious and

¹⁰² Just in terms of sheer numbers, the word *caput* appears four times in *Histories* 4 & 5, as opposed to seventeen times in *Histories* 1-3.

¹⁰³ Tac. *Hist.* 5.8: *Magna pars Iudaeae vicis dispergitur, habent et oppida: Hierosolyma genti caput.* ("A large part of Judea is scattered with villages, and they have towns: Jerusalem is the capital [head] of the nation.") Note that Tacitus has already called Caesarea the *caput Iudaeae* at 2.78, but there is probably a distinction being made here between the Roman *caput* (Caesarea) and the Jewish *caput* (Jerusalem)—note also that Tacitus calls Jerusalem the *genti caput*, implying that it belongs to the locals.

secular restorations (4.38-53). Indeed business in Rome becomes more orderly with Mucianus and Domitian in charge (4.11). Domitian even proposes that Galba receive honors, and the senate votes a memorial for Piso (4.40)—all of these acts aim at correcting some of the madness from the past year. Flavius Sabinus is given a state funeral (4.47). The most important symbol of the Flavian restoration of Rome, however, is the Capitolium's rededication, which occurred on 21 June 70 CE, almost two years to the date after Nero's suicide (4.53).

A possible explanation for the abandonment of the decapitation motif is Vespasian's accession to the principate. Tacitus presents Vespasian as a proper leader, a proper *caput*, and the Flavians are responsible for rebuilding Rome after the chaos of 69 CE. On a large scale, Tacitus depicts the Flavians' restoration of order as a change in the types of war being fought—all of which Tacitus hints at in the *Histories'* preface. If multiple *bella interna* (*civilia*) dominate *Histories* 1-3,¹⁰⁴ Civilis' revolt, which dominates large sections of *Histories* 4 and 5, is presented by Tacitus as an *internum externumque bellum*. Tacitus then resolves the Revolt of Civilis in *Histories* 5 (5.14-26), where the Judean Revolt, a true *bellum externum*, takes center-stage (5.11-13). The gradual restitution of Rome sets the stage for the removal of direct conflict from the city.

Tacitus pointedly employs imagery of decapitation at the emotional climax of each of the first three books. As Ash has noted, Tacitus does not use metaphors flippantly, and we have seen how Tacitus has meticulously constructed *Histories* 1-3 to highlight the importance of Rome itself over the ineffectual rulers of 69 CE. The change comes in *Histories* 4—Vespasian rescues Rome and establishes relative peace. Such structural

¹⁰⁴ Tac. *Hist.* 1.2: *trina bella civilia, plura externa ac plerumque permixta*. At 2.69, *principium interno simul externoque bello parantibus fatis*.

elaboration suggests great artistry on Tacitus' part. The use of artistry and *inventio* raises questions about the "facts" of 69 CE, but I will argue that such artful structuring does not impugn Tacitus' historical integrity; the decapitation motif can elucidate Tacitus' interpretation and analysis of the events of 69 CE.

"Facts" and Artistry in the *Histories*

Until a few decades ago, scholars tended to take for granted that ancient historians intended, if they did not always succeed, to provide factually correct historical accounts. Syme, the traditional historian *par excellence*, paid careful attention to how Tacitus structured his narrative, but seemed rarely to question whether the events Tacitus described were historical. Like other scholars of his time he conceded that the reported speech involved a certain amount of invention, but treated the narrative as essentially factual.¹⁰⁵ Woodman, however, famously argued that "classical historiography is different from its modern namesake because it is primarily a rhetorical genre and is to be classified (in modern terms) as literature rather than as history."¹⁰⁶ That has now become the dominant position, despite the recent critiques of scholars like Damon and Lendon. Damon has noted how literariness and historical fact are not mutually exclusive: there often remains an underlying substructure of historical "fact," even though certain narrative elements are often altered or elaborated by an ancient historian.¹⁰⁷ Lendon argues just this when he says, "Rhetorical elaboration...is anyway possible without doing violence to the basic facts of the story..."¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁵ Syme 1958b: 191-2.

¹⁰⁶ Woodman 1988: 197.

¹⁰⁷ Damon 2007.

¹⁰⁸ Lendon 2009: 41.

Lendon would call Tacitus' literary artistry "constrained" by his predecessors and by what actually happened.¹⁰⁹ But Lendon would also have us, as historians and philologists, reject contemporary literary criticism of Tacitus in favor of the "robust intellectual habits of modern historians."¹¹⁰ Although I support many of Lendon's ideas, I agree most with Damon, who identifies rhetorical elements in Tacitus' work, but believes they are less far-reaching than Woodman would have us believe.¹¹¹

As we have seen in this study of the decapitation motif, it appears that Tacitus used great literary creativity to fashion his narrative of 69 CE. At first glance, Tacitus' creative use of decapitation imagery seems to support Woodman's argument. We also have seen, however, that Tacitus' creativity is constrained by certain historical events, as Lendon suggests. When we turn to Otho's suicide, for example, we witness Tacitus' express choice to include a decapitation reference, but we must also concede that Tacitus' choice does not distort the established events surrounding Otho's death in the parallel tradition; instead, Tacitus inserts a comment on Otho's anxiety about decapitation, and he psychoanalyzes Otho's mental state before death. In these examples, Tacitus has stayed true to his raw historical data while at the same time expanding on his larger theme of decapitation. In this way the decapitation motif provides an example of the way that rhetorical elaboration does not preclude factual accuracy.

¹⁰⁹ Lendon 2009: 41, "Of all the ancient genres, history arguably gave its practitioner the least freedom to stray from what had gone before – be that what he and his generation had known and suffered themselves, or the writings of his predecessors...If we assume that Tacitus worked in the same way (and we must), we cannot read him as an unconstrained literary artist. The art of the ancient historian was like that of the sonnet-forgers: all about working within constraints."

¹¹⁰ Lendon 2009: 61.

¹¹¹ Damon 2007.

The evidence for Tacitus' artistic elaboration is even clearer in the metaphorical decapitations we have seen. For example, the reference to Nymphidius Sabinus' uprising in the preface coincides with the historical event: Nymphidius was probably the leader of a failed revolt against Galba. But Tacitus has chosen to write *capite ablato*, at once suggesting Nymphidius' downfall and death as well as his own overarching theme. The Romans metaphorically decapitated Aventicum, dubbed a *caput*, but literally they subdued a city. Similarly, the Capitolium's destruction—Tacitus' crowning dramatic moment of *Histories* 1-3—is another established historical event. Tacitus focuses the reader's attention on the Capitolium episode by drawing out his account of its destruction and by providing it with an obituary (which is itself a miniature history, full of historical detail). None of the decapitation imagery detracts from the historical events.¹¹²

Tacitus comments upon and analyzes his civil war theme through the careful use of an appropriate and established *caput* metaphor, already laden with the horrific burden of civil wars past. All these instances of the decapitation motif in the *Histories*, combined with the overall structure of Books 1-3 and the motif's abandonment in Book 4, can be read as a larger metaphor for the lack of leadership in 69 CE. Tacitus' decapitation motif forcefully communicates his negative assessment of Galba, Otho, and Vitellius: through his emphasis on the "headlessness" of 69 CE, Tacitus demonstrates the disastrous consequences of the absence of leadership. On the other hand, Vespasian's nascent regime in *Histories* 4 shows us how Rome thrives through the cooperation of all its constituent parts (*princeps*, senate, people, soldiers, and city) under the leadership of a strong head. Hence, through the

¹¹² We might argue that the omission of certain details, such as the precise way Vitellius died, contradicts Tacitus' commitment to the "facts." If it is a fact that Vitellius was beheaded, then that detail's omission is not a lie; it is an authorial choice about how to present the material. Tacitus may have excluded the exact details of Vitellius' death, but he does not exclude Vitellius' death. Yet if Tacitus did omit Vitellius' decapitation here, it may have been to draw more attention to the destruction of the Capitolium, as we have seen.

decapitation motif we can see how Tacitus uses creative artistry and literary devices in collaboration with historical “facts” to produce a dynamic and powerful narrative.

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