This article is based on one of the option groups on Tacitus I ran at the ARLT Summer School at Moreton Hall School in July 2012. I would like to thank the group for its contribution and my Year 13 students for acting as guinea pigs.

I intend to focus mainly on Tacitus' *Annals* 15.20-23 and 33-45 which is set for A2 level 2013-5, and which replaces the previous prescription from *Annals* 14. References are to book 15 unless otherwise stated.

I began the session by asking what a reader would expect in a history book today. Some reference to the sources? An impartial view? A thorough, accurate account? Historical writing is surely expected to operate within certain limits; it should pay attention to the different types of evidence (written, oral, and archaeological) without putting an imaginative slant on events or people, though it may reflect the interpretation or even bias of the author.

Tacitus chooses to write *Annales*, a year-by-year account of the reigns of the Emperors Tiberius through to Nero, dated by the names of the consuls. Tacitus himself reached the consulship in AD 97 and the proconsulship of Asia in AD 113; he probably had access to information about some of the events he covers and could have made use of his own political experience and knowledge.

Tacitus is known to have made use of both documentary and literary sources (auctores, 38.1, ferunt, 10.4; 23.4; 45.3, consistit, 16.1) although he mentions only one or two of them by name (and none in 15) and little is known about them. He refers to the Senatorial records, *acta senatus* (74.3), and used an account of the deaths of famous men (Rusticus' eulogy of Thrasea Paetus, mentioned in *De mortibus tyrannorum*), parts of chapters 36 (edicto testificans), and 43 read like imperial edicts. Thrasea's words (20.3-21) ‘may or may not be based on a speech actually delivered’ (N. P. Miller), but it admirably fulfils its purpose in making clear the character and feelings of the speaker. The account of each year ends with a list of omens and portents, which may have been taken from a record of such events.

Tacitus claims to be writing ‘sine ira et studio’ (1.1) ‘dispassionately and without personal interest,’ and makes the comment that the events of the reigns of the early Emperors including Nero were recorded falsely during their lifetimes from fear of the consequences, and, after their deaths, were also made up as the result of the recent ill-feeling. Tacitus however cannot escape the charge of bias; he selects some events to the exclusion of others, and interprets them, often by implication. His public service under Domitian perhaps left a bitter taste which is reflected in his extreme view of Nero (compare his comment that readers expect double meanings 4.33.4).

Within the annalistic framework he selects events, focusing on individuals, primarily on Nero himself in Book 15 and a few other characters, and he sometimes puts weight on these events out of all proportion to their significance. He likes to mention alternative explanations with the second being the preferred one - often introduced to implicate Nero. There are several examples of this, such as:

- the conflicting evidence for the start of the fire: ‘sequitis clades, forte an dolo principis incertum (nam utrumque auctores prodidere),’ ‘it is unclear whether this happened by chance or through some plot of the Emperor (for the sources have recorded both)’ (38.1);
- the reason for some people continuing to throw torches: *sine ut ruptus lientius exercentem seu in sux*; ‘Either so that they could carry on plundering without restraint or because they really had been given orders’ (38.7); and
- Nero’s fit in the temple: *seu nomine exterrent, seu facinorum recordatione numquam timore vacuus*; ‘Whether because the presence of the god was terrifying him, or because he was never free of fear at the memory of his crimes’ (36.2). Disapproval of Nero is often implied or hinted at by the juxtaposition of events, such as his ‘marriage’ to Pythagoras (37.4) and the start of the fire (38), or by association (eg. with Vatinius 34.2) or comparison (eg. with Torquatus, 35).

To reinforce the point thatTacitus is selective with his choice of events, let us look more closely at the events of AD64 (33-47):

- 33-34: Nero wants to perform on stage; he proposes a trip to Greece, (24 lines, 10% of the total)
- 35: the suicide of Torquatus, a possible rival (11 lines, 4%)
- 36-37: Nero in Rome; his extravagances and depravity; (40 lines, 15%)
- 38-45: the fire and its aftermath; Nero’s new house; the measures taken to prevent a recurrence; blame falls on the Christians, (140 lines, 60%)
- 45: Seneca attempts to retire, (7 lines, 3%)
- 46-47: an attempted revolt by gladiators; a shipwreck; bad omens, (20 lines, 8%)

One way of illustrating this visually for the pupils would be to use an A4 sheet of paper divided up according to the proportions above to represent the events of AD64. More than half of the page would be devoted to the fire and its aftermath. It might be worth considering too what events are missing (Nero was the Emperor). This could then be related to events today by using the following activity; select any 10 events from 2012 (at random, the Jubilee; the Olympic Games; the actions of the coalition government; a banking scandal; the Euro; petrol prices; events in Afghanistan; a disaster; a celebrity divorce / trial;
Tacitus’ Annals 15 - Is This Really History? Is it Meant to be?

However, not only is Tacitus selective, but he is also writing about events that happened about 50 years before the time of writing (around AD112), when he was about eight years old. So we need to look at the events of, for example, 1960: JFK won the US election; Francis Chichester sailed round the world; quarks, the laser and the first weather satellite appear; the Rome Olympics, the Sharpeville massacre in South Africa and Macmillan’s wind of change speech occurred; Lady Chatterley’s Lover was no longer banned; Camus and Pasternak died, and Princess Margaret married a commoner. The point here is that very few people, let alone pupils, will be able to name any event from 1960, and even if they can, their recollection of the event may not be accurate. So we and Tacitus need to rely on more than just memory.

So, is this the stuff of history, or is it…a biography?

Unlike the works of Suetonius, the Annals is not a biography of Nero. However, while sticking precisely to the annalistic structure, Tacitus does tend to concentrate on the actions and preoccupations of his main character almost in the manner of an historical novel. Sometimes it is hard to believe that the character we meet is in charge of a vast Empire, with provinces to govern, meetings to attend and letters to sign. His interests clearly lie elsewhere. So should we look upon Tacitus as a Philippa Gregory (who also sticks to a rigid chronological structure) or as a Hilary Mantel, whose novels are thoroughly researched but very much individual interpretations of characters and events?

In her book Bring up the Bodies Hilary Mantel says, ‘In this book I try to show how a few crucial weeks might have looked from Thomas Cromwell’s point of view. I am not claiming authority for my version; I am making the reader a proposal, an offer.’ Sometimes Tacitus, just like a historical novelist, seems to know what his character is thinking: he does this when he writes ‘principias Orientis, maxime Aegyptum, secretis imaginibus agitans’; pondering in his secret thoughts the Eastern provinces and especially Egypt’ (36.1). However, there is little in the way of conversation, and little direct character drawing. Instead character tends to be conveyed through actions and behaviour; the description of Vatinius, the low-born, foul-mouthed cripple (34.2) is an exception.

In some ways, Tacitus is closer to the Chronicle of the 20th Century on my bookshelf, which devotes six sides to each year of the century and includes extracts from the newspapers, photographs and lists of the main events of each month including significant births and deaths. The length of each extract varies from one line to several paragraphs. Clearly the editors have had to be selective, although it is worth asking on what grounds they have made their choice. In this case we are moving into the territory of the newspaper: but newspapers must be sold, and they need to be readable and entertaining. As well as being selective they may adopt an angle, often a political one. Nero is a showman, beloved of the people but hated by the ruling classes. In the more popular papers and magazines the tone moves towards that of shock and gossip, with the focus on celebrities (compare the reaction to Kate Middleton’s and Poppaea’s babies), scandal (Nero’s marriage to Pythagoras), rumour (Torquatus’ imperial pretensions), diet (Seneca), and disaster (the shipwreck).

Hullo Magazine recently featured Prince Charles’ love of water colour painting - less scandalous than acting and chariot racing, I suppose.

Unlike today, Tacitus had to rely on words without pictures; but sometimes there are the elements of a play or a film (as befits an Emperor who loved acting), selected and perhaps stereotypical characters (the good guys, Seneca, Thrasea, Torquatus, and the bad ones, Nero, Vatinius and Tigellinus), a clear visual emphasis and a dramatic focus. This is particularly true in the account of Agrippina’s death (14.8): a series of snapshots at the action moves from outside the house to the bedroom and the murder, with Agrippina’s famous last words which may or may not echo those of Seneca’s Jocasta - a multi-faceted allusion. The Pisonian conspiracy is treated in a similar way. The account of the fire is worth looking at from this angle, with its focus first on the fire itself as it spread, and then the change of emphasis to its victims and their different fates (38).

Tacitus is clearly conscious that he is writing a carefully crafted work of literature for posterity, an aspect probably absent from a 21st-century history text book which is likely soon to be replaced. Sometimes this may have implications for the content. Themes related to Nero are followed through: acting, theatres and dressing up, as detailed below:

- Nero dresses as a bride (37.4) and as a gladiator (44.5);
- the Christians are dressed up in the skins of wild animals (44.4);
- Nero sings while Rome burns (39.3) and after the theatre at Naples collapsed (34.1);
- Nero is quick to put on, attend or even take part in gladiatorial games or shows, such as those for the birth of his daughter (23.2), the Juvenile Games (held in his own gardens) (33.1), Vatinius’ games (34.1), and the killing of the Christians (again in his own gardens) (44.5).
- Perhaps the animals he collected were for the purpose of display (37.2).

Finally, there is the moral stance. There is a gradual building up of Tacitus’ disapproval and condemnation of Nero, from minor to major examples of his depravity. This is clear in chapters 33-37, with the climax: ‘ipsa … nihil flagitiiae religerur … nihil paucum past des non ex illo contaminatorium grege … in modum solemnium consiugiorum denapisset,’ he himself … had left no depravity untried … until a few days later he got married to one of that crowd of disgusting men … in the style of a traditional wedding’ (37.4). Then follows the account of the fire, where Nero’s role is quite amoral. It is suggested that he set fire to Rome in order to build himself a new palace and even to found a new city, Neronopolis, and then used the Christians as a scapegoat. Even his philanthropic actions (43) were only done for show.

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1 Compare the comments made connecting the fire in York Minster and the appointment of David Jenkins as Bishop of Durham in 1984!
2 Philippa Gregory is the author of several books of historical fiction. See http://www.philippagregory.com for details.
3 Bring up the Bodies by Hilary Mantel was published by Fourth Estate in 2012.
4 Chronic of the 20th Century was published by Longman in 1988.