

# La Renaissance de Tacite

## Commenter les *Histoires* et les *Annales* au XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle

Kevin Bovier

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With the aim, reiterated in both the introduction and the conclusion, of filling a gap in the body of studies on the modern reception of Tacitus's work and being 'motivé par l'absence d'une étude d'ensemble de ces commentaires' (14), Kevin Bovier traces the reception of the *Annals* and *Histoires* from 1515 to around 1570 with philological meticulousness. While most scholarly attention, starting with Giuseppe Toffanin's seminal work (1921), has been on the phenomenon of Tacitism between the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century, Bovier shifts his focus to Tacitus's reception before his political and moral re-use. Through the prism of the humanist commentaries and annotations to the editions—and manuscripts—of the two main Tacitan works, *La Renaissance de Tacite* aims to answer the question 'comment les Histoires et les Annales de Tacite passent-elles du statut d'ouvrages inconnus à la fin du Moyen Âge à celui d'œuvres majeures à la fin du XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle?' (17). To respond to a problem encompassing both the history of ideas and the history of the reception of classical antiquity, Bovier takes the circuitous route of the history of philology and the history of the book, considering the role and practices of humanistic exegesis, the historical actors involved in these practices, their objectives, as well as their readers.

Drawing upon the work of Valéry Berlincourt (2013) on the reception of Statius, particularly in terms of the methodological approach to humanist philology, and upon Lucie Claire's recent studies on the Renaissance reception of Tacitus, Bovier unfolds his analysis in six chapters, organised both chronologically and thematically. Chapter 1 explores Tacitus's *nachleben* leading up to the humanist recovery of his works, starting with *Germania*, first published as an appendix in 1472. The topic is discussed concisely, with the narrative focusing mainly on the first *annotated* edition of the *Histoires* and *Annals* from 1515 by Filippo Beroaldo the Younger (during this period, these works were not recognized as separate entities). Bovier does not merely compare the manuscript text to the changes made by Beroaldo, but provides readers with a

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comprehensive analysis of the printed work in its entirety, complete with a detailed colour image of the edition under consideration.

This method is also evident in chapter 2, a sort of ‘meet the humanists’ session. Similar to his treatment of Beroaldo, Bovier provides a detailed bio-bibliographical account of the relevant humanists, an analysis of their commentaries and annotations on Tacitus, and their corrections; all accompanied by a precise bibliographical description of the reference edition and high-resolution images. In this way, the reader can follow, humanist by humanist, the exegetical as well as hermeneutical work unfolding in the 1517 commentaries by Andrea Alciato (1492–1550); in the *Castigationes* and *Thesaurus* of 1533, and its 1544 re-edition by Beatus Rhenanus (1485–1547); in the *Annotatiunculæ* of 1541 by the humanist Emilio Ferretti (1489–1552); in the annotations dated 1556 by the lesser-known Vincent de la Loupe (?); in the *Notæ* drawn up between 1559 and 1560 by Marcus Vertrarius Maurus (1525/1530–?), the first to distinguish between *Annals* and *Histories*, and finally in the annotations—the only manuscripts studied by Bovier—of the humanist Giovanni Ferrerio (1502–1579), dated 1567–1568.

The general presentation of commentators and editions serves as preparation for the reading of chapters 3 and 4, where Bovier examines the humanist practices underpinning the above-mentioned commentaries and their implications for Tacitan reception. The third chapter, ‘corriger et éclaircir’ (101), deals in particular with the formal aspects of commentaries, the humanist’s connection to the manuscript, and the broader relationship to sources for the purpose of *emendatio*, *emendatio ope codicis* or *emendatio ope ingenii*. Bovier emphasises the continuity in the edits made by the commentators, with Rhenanus and Maurus standing out for their exceptional proficiency in using antiquarian or literary material to elaborate conjectures consistent with the correction of the Tacitan text. They also shared a preference for *coniectura* over *divinatio* when proposing interpretations of Tacitus’s corrupted passages. By comprehending the modifications and corrections made by the commentators in chronological succession, Bovier is also able to ‘donner aperçu de la fortune des conjectures humanistes dans les éditions’ (168): the reception of Tacitus’s work is closely tied to the fortune of its editors. On the other hand, the commentators themselves do not hesitate to use, alongside manuscripts, the edition prepared by their predecessors.

In Chapter 4, ‘approfondir’ (207), Bovier moves away from purely exegetical-philological issues for the first time to discuss the in-depth analysis crafted by humanists in their commentaries. In the transition from textual exegesis to humanistic hermeneutics, Bovier underscores that, while the insights are eclectic and difficult to categorise, there emerges a common interest shared by almost all commentators in matters of law, due to their legal training—with the exception of Beatus Rhenanus. It is indeed through the historiographical category of legal humanism—*humanisme juridique*—that Bovier expounds ‘les approfondissements à caractère juridique qui se trouvent dans les notes’ (223). Beyond examples of pure legal history, such as Tacitus’s

accounts of the *confaerratio*, Bovier dwells on historical topics. This is evident in the comments on the ancient Helvetians—were they Gauls or Germans?— and, even more interestingly, in the annotations to Tacitan passages concerning Jews and Christians. These annotations are decisive in scrutinizing Tacitus's presumed or real impiety. Bovier recalls how 'dans le cas où Tacite faillit dans sa tâche d'historien, le commentateur doit alors intervenir pour rétablir la vérité, tant évangélique qu'historique' (252).

From chapter 5 onwards, the focus shifts to, if we may say so, the reception of the reception of Tacitus. In the first part, Bovier questions the self-fashioning of the commentators—how they present themselves as scholars, antiquarians, or patriots, both in the peritext of the works analysed in chapter 2, and within the commentaries themselves. In the second part, however, the focus turns to the horizon of the commentators' expectations and the actual readers of their annotated editions. Hopes about the type of audience vary from commentator to commentator, with an awareness also of the difficulties of Tacitan Latin. While some, like Alciato, only hope for scholarly readers, others, like de la Loupe, expect an audience that is not necessarily learned. In this sense, one of the most fascinating aspects of the chapter is the exposure of two cases of reading and reusing the commentaries analysed earlier. The first involves the margin notes of one M. de Tongres, found by Bovier in a copy of the 1519 re-edition of Tacitus annotated by Alciato. Bovier's narrative, hitherto rigidly philological and almost didactic, gives way to a kind of micro-history, recounting the story of the two young owners and readers of Tacitus's work: two students, the first of whom died around the age of twenty in a duel, the second the heir to the book and the narrator of his companion's events. The second example of reading and interpretation concerns the university reception of the commentaries on Tacitus's work, thanks to the well-known notes of the humanist Francesco Robortello (1516–1567). Of course, Bovier acknowledges the limits of a reception based on isolated cases, but one cannot but appreciate the effort to condense, in a single volume, both the reception of Tacitus's *Annals* and *Histories* and the reception of humanist annotations to Tacitus. The chapter concludes by returning to the central theme of Tacitus's reception in the sixteenth century, Tacitism. What knowledge did the humanists, editors, commentators, and readers of Tacitus have of the anacyclosis and *similitudo temporum* between the past described by the Roman historian and their present? In other words, what understanding did they have of those key terms that allowed the transition from Tacitus to Tacitism? Once again, Bovier chooses to trace his authorities in chronological order, answering the question case by case. However, excluding Ciceronian references to the *historia magistra vitae*, only one of the commentators, Ferrerius, speaks openly of *Similitudo temporum nostrum*. This shows how this early exegetical and humanistic reception of Tacitus is both independent of and preparatory to the later interpretations of scholars like Justus Lipsius (1547–1606): there would be no Tacitism without the exegetical work of correction, commentary, and edition that the humanists analysed by Bovier carried out on Tacitus's works.

This is precisely what Kevin Bovier states in chapter six as a conclusion. The hermeneutic evolution leading from a Ciceronian reading of history to Tacitism would, in fact, be the combination of the reception of the *Annals* and the *Histories* with the ‘nombreux troubles politiques et religieux qui agitaient l’Europe à cette époque et qui poussaient les intellectuels à chercher des remèdes dans le passé’ (301). It is Rome’s past as recounted by Tacitus and those who, from Beroaldo to Ferrerio, contributed to its *Renaissance*.

It is evident that *La Renaissance de Tacite* is the reworking, the *labor limae*, of a rich dissertation on Tacitus’s reception. This, however, does not compromise its readability but offers a condensed presentation, in about three hundred pages, of a rich body of observations. Here, one can appreciate the philological gifts of both Tacitus’s commentators and Bovier himself. Despite minor unavoidable oversights—Florence is not ‘occupée’ (56) in 1529–1530, but besieged—the volume successfully combines exegetical and bibliographical concerns with historiographical problems. Together with the equally recent *Marc-Antoine Muret lecteur de Tacite* by Lucie Claire (2022), *La Renaissance de Tacite* is an important work that delivers what it promised: ‘comblent une lacune dans la recherche sur la réception de l’historien romain à la Renaissance’ (297).