

This paper focuses on the theme of the mutability of identity in the Histories of Tacitus. I first examine two passages (2.20 and 3.47) where characters appear to be undergoing a transformation of identity. While some are imperfectly moving from being non-Roman to being Roman (a Roman cohort in Pontus had been a royal auxiliary before that kingdom became a Roman province), others are shifting in the other direction, towards the barbarian (Caecina). These examples of intermediate identities show that the categories 'Roman' and 'foreign' are becoming less stable: a variety of possibilities exist between them. Readings of these two passages will alert us to clues for how to understanding the reaction of Sextilia, Vitellius' mother, to the news that her son has accepted the honorary title of Germanicus:

et pari probitate mater Vitelliorum Sextilia, antiqui moris: dixisse quin etiam ad primas filii sui epistulas ferebatur, non Germanicum a se, sed Vitellium genitum. (Hist. 2.64)

Sextilia is punning on Vitellius' name – alluding to its resemblance to the Oscan word for Italy, Viteliu – in order to remind him of his native Italian heritage at a time when he is advancing on Rome with an army characterized as German. She attempts to assert that his true roots are native Italian and that he should cease acting as though he were a German invader. Sextilia, however, does not recognize the many levels of her own pun. Contrary to her purposes, the pun challenges the idea of a unified Italian identity because the use of Oscan points not to an earlier and purer Roman/Latin identity, but to the competing non-Latin and non-Roman Oscan communities of Italy. In fact, it can be read specifically as a reference to Viteliu, the Oscan name for Italy during the Social War, attested on coins. Reading the pun specifically as a reference to the Social War changes the meaning entirely. It would bring to mind the conflict that once and for all united the previously multi-ethnic Italy under the banner and citizenship of Rome. It would refer to the violent incorporation of different native Italian identities into the Roman identity. These deeper meanings challenge the notion that there was an earlier, pure period of Roman identity. In fact, we can conclude that Roman identity at least as far back as the last centuries BC was evolving, specifically by incorporating other communities. The pun turns out to encode within itself the diverse Italian identities. We learn from these passages that identity confusion and the ensuing political/military crisis of AD 69 are in fact not unprecedented in Roman history.