

At *Ann.* 12.1-2 Tacitus reports the *consilium* held to choose Claudius' new wife from three aristocratic women (including the *princeps*' ambitious niece Agrippina), and the roles influential freedmen played in this. Syme considered that this account was a comic parody of an imperial *consilium*, placed at the start of a new book to relieve tension after the drama of Messalina's death (*Tacitus* (1958), vol. 2 p.539 and n. 7; see also Koestermann *Annalen* (1967), vol. 3 p.109). But this *consilium* deserves more attention, particularly since it provides the forum for a personal decision which will have immense political consequences, and bring about the accession of Nero. In this paper I argue that its placement in the book and its dramatic setting highlight Tacitus' concern with the usurping of imperial power by the immediate circle of the *princeps*. I shall examine how he amplifies the importance of this episode by playing on his own contemporaries' ideal conceptions of, and anxieties about the roles of the imperial *domus* and *consilium*, which had such potential to become the battleground of public and private concerns.

The significance of imperial women for the *Ann.* and their intrusion into traditional male domains has been the subject of a number of recent studies (e.g. Fagan, 'Messalina's folly', *CQ* 52 (2002), 566-79); notably, the study of Hälikkää ('Discourses of body, gender, and power in Tacitus', *Women, Wealth, and Power in the Roman Empire* (2002), pp. 75-104), has pointed out that this intense interest in female roles is a late development in Tacitus' writing. The importance of understanding how his works were transmitted and received by contemporary audiences of Trajan's reign has also been shown in an important preliminary study by Rutledge ('Trajan and Tacitus' audience: Reader reception of *Annals* 1-2', *Ramus* 27 (1997), 141-59), and my study relies on and develops a number of his conclusions.

What did Tacitus expect his readers to visualize when he used the term *consilium*? I shall answer this firstly with a brief review of its uses in his works; it appears sometimes with positive connotations (cf. the military *consilium* of Vespasian at *Hist.* 2.81, or the desperate gathering of Thrasea's friends at *Ann.* 16.26), but where it is associated with the *princeps* and his inner circle in the *Ann.* it always denotes something which *should* be open and legitimate, but is not (cf. the advice given to Livia in *Ann.* 1.6 to keep *consilia amicorum* secret, or the description of Poppaea and Tigellinus as *saeuienti principi intimum consiliorum*, *Ann.* 15.61). I shall then examine the contemporary idealized view of the imperial *consilium* provided in Pliny's *Letters* and *Panegyric*, where Trajan is depicted as always respectful of constitutional rights and the legal skills of his *amici*, and concerned to protect and foster public morality (cf. *Epist.* 6.31); his regime is also extolled for the complete absence of freedmen in the decision making process (*Paneg.* 88.1). I shall consider Pliny's idealized views in light of systems of imperial representation under Trajan, and the subtle messages which may be encoded in them, as discussed in Seelentag, *Taten und Tugenden Traians* (2004). I shall also refer to other ancient sources which suggest considerable anxiety about the procedures and power-groupings in the emperor's inner circle (e.g. *Acta Alexandrinorum* VIII, which depicts a *consilium* at which Trajan's wife Plotina influences participants on behalf of the Jews). Consideration of these documents will show that although many contemporary sources tried to project the image of the imperial *consilium* as something magisterial and impartial, ordinary Romans were well aware it was a concentration of power which could easily be abused.