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The reinterpretation of *luxuria* during the reign of Tiberius: From Sallust and Livy to Tacitus

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to examine *luxuria* and its semantic evolution from its earliest appearances to the reign of Emperor Tiberius. Deeply embedded in Roman society, the concept of *luxuria* represents a luxurious way of living in both private and public life. It is closely associated with *avaritia* and conceptually opposed to *parsimonia* and *frugalitas*, two moral values central to the *mos maiorum*. *Luxuria* is a recurring theme in historiographical works, particularly in their prologues. In this research I will compare, in chronological order, the *Bellum Catilinae* of Sallust (5, 9-12, 24-28, 52) and the *Ab Urbe Condita* of Titus Livy (Praef. 5, 9-12, 24-28, 52) and conclude with the *Annales* of Tacitus, focusing mainly on the letter of Tiberius in Book 3 (52-54), where the issue of *luxuria* is discussed. The ultimate aim is to highlight the evolving meaning of this concept in Tacitus, where *luxuria* is no longer merely an undermining factor for Roman moral values and social cohesion. Initially regarded with a fully pejorative connotation as a primary cause of moral decline following the expansionist wars of the second and first centuries BC, *luxuria* appears to be received with relative leniency by the Principate. It is increasingly recognized as a fundamental axis of political power and social reality. White's (2014) study is particularly valuable for this paper, as it clarifies key terminology and its interpretation through an analysis of various texts. Similarly, Bhatt's (2017) article contributes to the discussion by examining corruption in parallel with luxury, viewing the latter as a specific manifestation of a corrupt lifestyle—an interpretation crucial for understanding the *luxuria* debate in the *Annales*.

Introduction

Luxuria is a fundamental aspect of Roman society and, as such, a frequent subject of discussion among Roman authors across both prose and poetic genres. The significance of the concept is further underscored by Berno's systematic study, which offers a comprehensive survey of the term and sheds light on its diverse and complex uses and interpretations throughout Latin literature.[1] *Luxuria* is a popular topic for historians in particular, who consider it to be one of the main causes of Rome's political crisis and moral decline. In this context, the term *luxuria* refers to any passion that serves the body, so that man is enslaved rather than free.[2] The aim of this paper is to study the concept of *luxuria* and its semantic evolution during the period of political transition from the traditional Republican system to the Principate, with an emphasis on the reign of Tiberius.[3]

The first part of this paper deals with the perception of *luxuria* as a corrosive element for political stability, social cohesion and moral behavior, with the historiographical works of Sallust (*Bellum Catilinae*) and Livy (*Ab Urbe Condita*) as the main textual sources. In the historiography of this period, *luxuria* is equated with corruption; it is a plague that infects the body politic and society, having first caused the collapse of morality and corrupted the moral reputation of the *populus Romanus*, as defined by the principles of the *mos maiorum,* the *mores* of the ancestors.

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[1] Berno 2023, Roman Luxuria: A Literary and Cultural History offers a comprehensive account of the concept of *luxuria*, from its first appearance in ancient Greek literature (*tryphe*, *τρυφή,* which LSJ translates in three ways: 1. *softness, delicacy, daintiness*; 2. *luxuriousness, wantonness;* 3. *daintiness, fastidiousness*; see also Berno 2023: 8-16) and its philosophical origins in Platonic and Stoic philosophy, focusing on its reception in Roman literary production up to the early Christian authors and its conceptual connotations, as "the opposite of a 'truly' Roman way of life".

[2.] Levick 1982: 61; Woodman 1996: 376-377; White 2014: 117. See Ulpianus *Digesta* 21.1.1.10 and 17.1.12.11, Cato *Orationum Fragmenta* 162 and *de Agri Cultura* 143.1, Cicero *Pro Caelio* 13 and *In Pisonem* 66, Sallust *Bellum Catilinae* 11.5, Livy *Ab Urbe Condita praef.*

[3.] White 2014: 136. For more on luxury as a political issue, see Berry 1994: 63. On the relationship between ethics and politics in the light of an examination of the (social) consequences of luxurious living see Zanda 2011: 5-8; Edwards 2002: 1-33; Wallace-Hadrill 1990: 148-149; Mitchell 1984; Berno 2023: 26-37. Kragelund 2009 is particularly useful for a more in-depth understanding of this issue.

In the second part, which examines *luxuria* in Tacitus' *Annales*, luxury is conceptually differentiated from its original purely negative meaning. By the time of Tiberius, *luxuria* appears not simply as a reflection of moral decay, but as a fundamental and even normative component of political and social structures. Tacitus, as a historian deeply aware of the historiographical tradition before him, does not merely echo the moralistic condemnations of Sallust and Livy. While he could have adopted a similarly critical stance, he chooses instead to assess the role of luxury in the Principate with greater detachment and nuance. Rather than condemning it outright, he acknowledges its embeddedness in the mechanisms of Roman power. *Luxuria*, though still a *vitium*, is presented as a cohesive force in imperial society—an integral part of the new political normalcy. Tacitus thus reflects on the moral contradictions of his time, offering not an endorsement of luxury, but a critical recognition of its political utility.

Luxuria **as a corrosive force**

Luxuria (or *luxury*), when used to characterize human behavior, is associated with desire (*cupiditas, voluptas*) and the systematic consumption of costly goods associated with excess and personal indulgence—such as extravagant food and drink, perfumes, expensive clothing and accessories, precious works of art, luxurious furniture and private residences (*villae*), and even the ownership of numerous slaves. The first definition of this term comes from Cato the Elder, who employed it in a moral context. According to Cato, the adjective *luxoriosus*, when used for people, denotes their indulgence in luxurious living and an insatiable need for self-gratification (private *luxuria*).[4] *Luxuria* is closely associated with *avaritia* (greed, avarice);[5] it is completely opposed to the principles of

[4.] Cato *Orationum Fragmenta* 162 [...] *neve haec laetitia nimis luxuriose eveniat*. *OLD, s.v. luxuria* (indulgence (esp. excessive) in good living, luxury, extravagance, or sim.), *luxurio* ((transf.) to revel immoderately or luxuriate (in success, prosperity, or sim.), become intoxicated, run riot / (spec.) to live a life of luxury, indulgo oneself), *luxuriosus* (given to luxury or selfindulgence.), *luxuriose* (exuberantly, unboundcdly; without moral restraint, licentiously), *luxus* (soft or extravagant living, (over-) indulgence, luxury.). Charlton, T.L. et al. 1879 *Harpers' Latin Dictionary*. Oxford: Charendon Press, pp. 1088-1089. Cf. Ulpianus *Digesta* 21.1.1.10.

[5.] *OLD* = *Oxford Latin Dictionary, s.v. avaritia* (greed of gain, avarice, rapacity; also, an act or instance of this, gluttonous greed.).

frugalitas[6] and *parsimonia* (frugality),[7] which embody temperance and moderation and refer to both moral and practical spheres. Luxury, therefore, emerges as a force that undermines the fundamental values of the *mos maiorum*.[8] This conceptual framework will inform the discussion that follows on the treatment of luxury in Sallust and Livy, with the ultimate aim of clarifying and distinguishing the various meanings of luxury in Tacitus, especially during the reign of Tiberius.

Sallust

Sallust (*Bellum Catilinae*) chronicles the rise of *luxuria* after the civil war between Marius and Sulla, and the despotic hegemony of Sulla.[9] From the very beginning, Sallust presents Catilina as a figure of inherent moral depravity, whose personal wickedness is reinforced by the broader corruption of the time, marked above all by *avaritia* and *luxuria*.[10] Elsewhere it is emphasized that *otium* (inactivity) and wealth (*divitiae*) now cause misery. Thus, elements that were the root of evil, namely greed for money on the one hand and for advancement in political power on the other, developed and led to

6. *OLD, s.v. frugalitas* (steadiness of life, sober habits, temperance, self-restraint).
7. *OLD, s.v. parsimonia* (temperance or moderation (in respect of something), a restrained or economical use (of something)).
8. Livy *Ab Urbe Condita* 34.4.2 *diversisque duobus vitiis, avaritia et luxuria, civitatem laborare, quae pestes omnia magna imperia everterunt.* Livy presents Cato as arguing that the destruction of the Roman Empire was due to the twin evils of avarice and luxury, which had continued to plague the state until then. Cf. Sallust *Bellum Catilinae* 54, where Sallust also presents a discourse by Cato in which the latter, on the one hand, accepts *luxuria* as an element of the daily life of the Roman elite; on the other hand, he explicitly opposes *luxuria* and *avaritia* because their scourge has led to the dissolution of morality and the distortion of politically, morally and socially acceptable behaviour. Berry 1994: 74-75. Cf. Sallust *Bellum Catilinae* 52.11 *Iam pridem equidem nos vera vocabula rerum amisimus: quia bona aliena lagriri liberalitas, malarum rerum audacia fortitude vocatur, eo res publica in extremo sita est*.
The quotation of passages on Sallust is based on Capps 1921. For Livy, see the Capps 1919 edition.
9. Lintott (1972); Levick 1982: 53; Dalby 2000: 11; Zanda 2011: 8; Berno 2023: 40-48.
10. Sallust *Bellum Catilinae* 5 *[...] incitabant praeterea conrupti civitatis mores, quos pessuma ac divorsa inter se mala, luxuria atque avaritia, vexabant.* See Ramsey 2007: 71-72. These two faults differ from each other in that they cause people to desire wealth and to squander it on frivolous pleasures and extravagances. This observation about the opposite nature of the two bad elements (*mala*) probably comes from Cato. Cf. Livy *Ab Urbe Condita* 52.7; Berry 1994: 167.

degeneration.[11] In contrast to other historians, he introduces the parameter of *ambitio*, a *vitium*, which, because it is associated with the man's *virtus*, degenerates the man's character.[12] The reason for this lies in his reference to emasculation as a consequence of *avaritia* and *luxuria*, a trait he addresses with particular seriousness because it weakens both the body and the soul.[13]

In *Bellum Catilinae*, Sallust appears to suggest that *avaritia* led to the triumph of *luxuria* over *ambitio*. The emergence and spread of opulence and luxurious lifestyles, however, can be attributed to the interplay between *avaritia* and *ambitio*, without necessarily implying a strictly causal or hierarchical relationship.[14] This raises the question of whether these vices are intrinsic features of the senatorial elite, lying dormant until conditions allow their expression, or whether it is *luxuria* itself that provokes and intensifies them. Regarding *avaritia*, Sallust and other historians imply that it is latent in human nature, requiring only the right circumstances to flourish.[15] *Ambitio*, likewise, was present in the *Respublica*, but the expansion of Roman imperial power exacerbated competition within the elite, driven by the pursuit of military and political *gloria*.[16] Among the historians of the late Republic, Sallust arguably offers the most developed and conceptually coherent analysis of *luxuria*: he treats it not as a mere consequence of other vices, but as a fundamental force behind Rome's moral and political collapse, culminating in the conspiracy of Catiline, which forms the core of his historical narrative.

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11. Sallust *Bellum Catilinae*10.2 [...] *iis otium divitiaeque, optanda alias, oneri miseriaeque fuere. igitur primo imperi, deinde pecuniae cupido crevit: ea quasi materies omnium malorum fuere. namque avaritia fidem probitatem ceterasque artis bonas subvortit;*.

12. Sallust *Bellum Catilinae*11.1 *Sed primo magis ambitio quam avaritia animos hominum exercebat, quod tamen vitium propius virtutem erat.* For further information regarding *ambitio* see Levick 1982: 54-55.

13. Sallust *Bellum Catilinae*11.3 *avaritia pecuniae studium habet, quam nemo sapiens concupivit: ea quasi venenis malis inbuta corpus animumque virilem effeminat, semper infinita <et> insatiabilis est, neque copia neque inopia minuitur*. Cf. Sallust *Bellum Catilinae* 54.28 (*inertia et mollitia animi*). On the concept of *effeminatio* and its relation to luxurious life see Cicero *de Officiis* 1, 35, 129; Zanda 2011: 4-5.

14. White 2014: 136.

15 Sallust *Bellum Catilinae* 10.1; cf. Lintott 1972: 627–629

16. Sallust *Bellum Catilinae* 12.1 *Postquam divitiae honori esse coepere et eas gloria, imperium, potentia sequebatur, hebescere virtus, paupertas probro haberi, innocentia pro malevolentia duci coepit.* Cf. White 2014: 122-123, 133; Edwards 2002: 22.

Livy

Livy discusses the concept of *luxuria* primarily in the preface of his work. In his introductory remarks, he states that one of his main aims is to examine how Roman morals declined due to the very forces that had once contributed to their cultivation. His second aim is to explore why his contemporaries were unable to neither control nor remedy their moral weaknesses (*vitia*).[17] He then observes that *avaritia* and *luxuria* penetrate more slowly in Rome than in any other state — where *paupertas* and *parsimonia* were highly esteemed — since limited possessions curtailed excessive desires. Yet wealth (*divitiae*) gave rise to *avaritia*, while excessive pleasures (*abundantens voluptates*) led to *luxum* and debauchery, culminating in both individual and collective ruin.[18]

Once again, *luxuria* is invoked as a causal factor for the decline of moral values within Roman society. Livy, however, traces the arrival of *luxuria* to Cornelius Manlius Vulso and his triumphant return from Asia Minor in 187 BC.[19] He emphasizes the significance of the fact that traditional *parsimonia* had flourished for an extended period.[20] Despite the arrival of *luxuria*, introduced by foreign and so-called barbarian peoples, it proved to be deeply corrosive. Livy presents its emergence as a consequence of the opportunities created by the massive influx of wealth and the importation of luxury goods—furniture, works of art, and other tokens of extravagance—that followed Rome's conquests in the 2nd and 1st centuries BC.[21] Rome is thus depicted as a living organism, whose very growth sets the

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17. Livy *Ab Urbe Condita Praef*. 9 *labente deinde paulatim disciplina uelut desidentes primo mores sequatur animo, deinde ut magis magisque lapsi sint, tum ire coeperint praecipites, donec ad haec tempora quibus nec uitia nostra nec remedia pati possumus peruentum est.* See Berno 2023: 49-57. Cf. Mineo 2015: 139-140. Ogilvie 1965: 27-28.
18. Livy *Ab Urbe Condita Praef*. 11-12 [...] *nec in quam [civitatem] tam serae avaritia luxuriaque immigrauerint, nec ubi tantus ac tam diu paupertati ac parsimoniae honos fuerit. adeo quanto rerum minus, tanto minus cupiditatis erat: nuper divitiae avaritiam et abundantes voluptates desiderium per luxum atque libidinem pereundi perdendique omnia inuexere.* See also Ogilvie 1965: 28-29.
19. Livy *Ab Urbe Condita* 39.6.1. Mineo 2015: 142 and Ogilvie 1965: 23. Cf. Ramsey 2007: 89; Levick 1982: 53; Zanda 2011: 8.
20. For Sallust, it flourished for a longer period, since he places its decline and arrival in *luxuria* during the civil war between Marius and Sulla.
21. White 2014: 118.

stage for its decay: just before reaching its peak strength, the city enters a phase in which a favourable climate allows for the development of that disease (*morbus*) that will ultimately threaten its moral health (*sanus*).[22]

Luxuria as a defining factor in political and social structures

My aim in this article is to highlight Tacitus' reinterpretation of the concept of *luxuria* during the reign of Tiberius, as presented in the *Annals*. As luxury is commonly treated as a prologue topic in historiographical and related texts, one would anticipate Tacitus to begin his *Annales* with a discussion of it, yet he places the subject within the body of his work instead, in the middle of his account of Tiberius' reign. Book three, paragraphs 52-55, describe the tensions within the *Principatus* in 22 AD over increased *luxuria* and the possible imposition of harsh measures by the *princeps*. The aim of this article is to demonstrate as adequately as possible that in Tacitus, corruption is a useful and integral part of the political and social system.[23] *Luxuria*, being a form of corruption, can arguably promote (or produce) and consolidate political power.

Luxus mensae

The discussion of *luxuria* in general is contained within a more specialised form of luxurious living: the banquet, the *luxus mensae* - specifically, luxury banquets consisting of expensive and rare types of food and drink. It is interesting, of course, that the specific terminology indicating the content of the paragraphs in question is mentioned in the last paragraph and not at the beginning of the episode. Perhaps Tacitus wants the reader to

22. Livy *Ab Urbe Condita* 10. Cf. 1.34.1, where it is argued that Rome is sick because of her personal ambition and love of luxury, and 25.40.2, where the event of Marcellus' capture of Syracuse (212 BC) is presented as a prelude to political crisis and moral decline. Contact with a foreign body characterised by luxury (whether from Asia, Greece or Etruria) automatically implies a tendency towards moral erosion. Cf. also: *et iam in Graeciam Asiamque transcendimus omnibus libidinum inlecebris repletas et regias etiam adtrectamus gazas* from Cato the Elder's discourse in 34.4.3; Mineo 2015: 143; Berry 1994: 68-69.
23. Bhatt 2017: 326-330. See White 2014: 124.

see this passage as a broader treatment of a theme explored by many Roman writers,[24] narrowing it only at the end to the specific case of luxurious banquets hosted by senatorial and elite Romans — the very group he is addressing.[25]

Tiberius' letter approving *luxuria*

In Book 3 of the *Annales* (3.52–54), Tacitus includes a letter[26] composed by Emperor Tiberius, which plays a pivotal role in the present discussion of *luxuria* as a key component of Rome's social and political structure. The letter was prompted by the accusations of Bibulus and other aediles concerning the potential reactivation of the *lex sumptuaria*, which had fallen into disuse, as well as the rising food prices. Bibulus probably refers to the law of Augustus dating back to 22 BC.[27] At this point it is useful to briefly recall an episode from the second book of the *Annals*, on the occasion of the trial of Libo Drusus, who was accused of inciting a rebellion against Tiberius. He was charged with luxury along with five other senators, and measures were taken against luxurious living (*senatus consultum de sumptu*):[28] A ban was imposed on the use of gold utensils at meals and on the wearing of silk by men. Further measures were proposed, including limits on the

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24. Tacitus belongs to the group of writers who take up the theme of *luxuria*, the realisation of which is a motif of Latin historiography; there is an excursus on *luxuria* in all the historiographers. Cf. Cato *Orat*. 162; *Agr*. 143.1; Cic. *Cael*. 13, *Pis*. 66; Hor. *Ep.* 2.3.77-81; Sen. *Ep*. 86; 87; 90; 95.18, 33.

25. Tacitus provides textual evidence of the *luxus mensae* from the outset. In 3.52 he mentions the terms *ventris* and *ganeae*, used to denote the gluttonous consumption of food. The focus on the particular manifestation of private luxurious living is implied from the outset. Cf. Suetonius *De Vitis Caesarum, Tiberius* 34.1 *popinas ganeasque*, where Tiberius seems to discourage gluttony.

26. Tiberius' letters, as described by Tacitus, serve as a means of examining issues of power and tyranny, shedding light on the emperor's complex relationship with communication and authority. In this case, the letter functions as the medium through which Tiberius, as emperor, articulates his views on the moral decline of his people, demonstrating that what was once considered *malum* had ultimately become an integral political and social element of Rome. At the same time, this letter is a literary construct, serving as a vehicle for Tacitus to position himself within the historiographical tradition of Sallust and Livy. See further Morello (2006).

27. Suetonius *De Vitis Caesarum, Divus Augustus* 34.1; Dio Cassius 54.2.3; Gellius *Noctes Atticae* 2.24.14. See Woodman 1996: 381.

28. Tacitus *Annales* 2.33. Cf. Levick 1999: 71-72.

amount of silver an individual could possess, regulations concerning household furnishings, and restrictions on the number of slaves one was allowed to own.

Particularly noteworthy is the intervention of Asinius Gallus, a distinguished senator and long-standing rival of Tiberius, who had been married to the emperor's former wife, Vipsania Agrippina. His stance sharply contrasts with that of Quintus Haterius, a celebrated but controversial orator closely associated with Augustan politics, and Octavius Fronto, a senator of military background and later consul, both of whom expressed more traditional and moralising views. Their divergent perspectives illustrate the broader ideological tensions surrounding *luxuria* within the Senate. Asinius Gallus argued in favour of opulence, claiming that any prosperous state is made up of citizens who in turn are themselves in a similar state. In his view, both the political and social status of a prominent man imply a corresponding level of economic wealth.[29] Like Asinius Gallus, *princeps* Tiberius, as we shall see, is in favour of *luxuria* because it establishes and strengthens prominent citizens.[30] Finally, the Senate raised the question through Bibulus to the *Princeps* of the restriction of gluttony and licentiousness. This led Tiberius to wonder whether possible reforms to limit private expenditure would solve the problem or whether they would be detrimental to the institution of the State, since they would mainly affect the most prominent citizens.[31] Finally, he decided to write a letter to the

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[29.] Tacitus *Annales* 2.33. Cf. also Bhatt 2017: 314-325, where the episode with Libo (2.27-32) is analysed in terms of the corruption of the political and legal system. His transgressive behaviour triggered actions that in turn violated laws and corrupted morals. Thus, the corruption of the entire legal system was revealed through social, political and legal actions. Tacitus's aim in this incident is again to highlight corruption as an integral part of the functioning of political power, with the ultimate aim of preserving the law within the Roman Empire. Cf. Bhatt 2017: 318.

[30.] It is a kind of *ambitio* of Sallust. Cf. Bhatt 2017: 329 on *luxuria* as a source of political virtue and the creation and consolidation of political identity for members of the elite. Cf. also Tacitus *Annales* 1.13, which mentions that Tiberius was suspicious of Arruntius because he was rich (*divitem suspectabat*). On the one hand, wealth conferred social prestige, crowning the hierarchical position of members of the elite, but on the other hand it was a sign of danger for those in positions of hegemony, for the more luxurious the life of a prominent man, the easier it was for him to claim a position of power. See Woodman 1996: 380; Seager 2005: 118.

[31.] Tacitus *Annales* 3. 52 *sed Tiberius saepe apud se pensitato an coerceri tam profusae cupidines possent, num coercitio plus damni in rem publicam ferret, quam indecorum adtrectare quod non obtineret vel retentum ignominiam et infamiam virorum inlustrium posceret* [...]. Here are Tiberius' three main concerns. It is interesting to consider the reflection on his personal reputation if he were to impose laws that would ultimately not be implemented due to political and social circumstances. Finally, it is worth highlighting the vocabulary used to indicate the blow and

Senate in which he would specifically argue in favor of *luxuria* as one of the fundamental and cohesive elements of the Roman state's structure.[32]

In the opening paragraph of his letter (3.53), Tiberius argues that legislation aimed at curbing private luxury reveals the inability of the *populus Romanus* to resist the deeply rooted and mature vices (*praevalida et adulta vitia*) in which it had become entrenched; he lists several forms of *luxuria* through which contemporary Romans have strayed from ancestral tradition (*priscum ad morem redicere*): enormous villas, great numbers of slaves of diverse origins, silver and gold, and valuable artworks such as statues and paintings.[33] The elaborate costumes of both women and men (*promiscas viris et feminis vestis*), made of extremely costly fabrics, are particularly noteworthy; women, moreover, spend exorbitant sums on jewels and precious stones (*lapidum causa*) imported from foreign or even hostile countries (*ad externas aut hostilis gentis*).[34]

This opening paragraph of Tiberius' letter appears neutral in tone and reflects the theoretical perspectives of Sallust and Livy, confirming that Tacitus, as a historian, is fully aware of the historiographical tradition preceding him. He agrees with his predecessors regarding the manifestations of luxury in both the private and public spheres of Roman life. The aim here is to identify common features in the treatment of *luxuria* motif within historiographical discourse, in order to subsequently highlight the points at which Tacitus' perspective diverges from that of the other two historians. Tiberius opens the second

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humiliation that the law limiting the expenses of the Roman elite would cause: *ingominiam* and *infamiam*. The quotation of passages on Tacitus is based on Page 1931.

Cf. 2.78 where it is stated that Pison wrote a letter to Tiberius accusing him of luxurious living and arrogance: *missisque ad Tiberium epistulis incusat Germanicum luxus et superbiae*. It is also worth noting that Drusus seemed to be addicted to luxury in his private life. This, however, did not diminish his popularity, for the people considered it normal for a young man and interpreted this behaviour as a reaction to Tiberius' austere and frugal ways. See Seager 2005: 90, 102, 118. It seems, therefore, that the Roman elite indulged in luxury.

32. Cf. Tacitus *Annales* 3.53 *in hac relatione subtrahi oculos meos melius fuit* [...]. Woodman 1996: 384. Tiberius is relieved to be away from Rome and does not directly address the issue. Besides, any legislation would be ineffective. He also points out at the end of his letter that he will not concern himself with pointless matters that do not benefit him or the Romans in general. Tacitus *Annales* 3.54 *quas cum gravis et plerumque iniquas pro re publica suscipiam, inanis et inritas neque mihi aut vobis usui futuras iure deprecor.* Cf. White 2014: 118.

33. Cf. Livy *Ab Urbe Condita* 39.6.7.

34. Perhaps this is an implicit reference to the fact that luxury is an external element that invaded Roman culture and corrupted its traditional moral principles. Cf. Bhatt 2017: 327.

paragraph of his letter (3.54) with a remark signaling strong irony.[35] He specifically notes that the recipients of his letter disapprove of luxury at banquets and social gatherings and are all eager to find ways to suppress such excess. However, he adds that any attempt to introduce legislation restricting luxury would trigger strong resistance from these same individuals, as such an initiative would be perceived as a threat to the very structure of the state (*civitatem verti*).[36] The condemnation of the elite's luxurious habits, particularly those displayed during symposia, implicates the senators themselves, as the behaviours criticised in the first paragraph predominantly reflect the customs of the upper social and economic classes. It is precisely here that Tiberius' irony toward the recipients of his letter — the Senators — become evident.

Thus Tiberius, as the speaking figure within Tacitus' historiography, transitions in *Ann.* 3.54 from the more practical manifestations of *luxuria* to its underlying moral implications. Echoing earlier ethicists and historians such as Sallust and Livy, he compares the consequences of luxurious living to physical illnesses, whose spread can only be checked through the application of specific remedies.[37] Similarly, diseased and enfeebled souls - both corrupt and corrupting - need special treatment to temper their passions. In the case of the *luxuriosus animus*, this remedy lies in the implementation and observance of legislation. Yet, a harsh condemnation of *luxuria* — specifically in the context of banqueting — would provoke resistance, as such practices were deeply ingrained in Roman daily life. Tiberius added that even Augustus' earlier laws had fallen into disuse.[38]

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35. Woodman 1996: 390.
36. Cf. Cato's discourse in Livy *Ab Urbe Condita* 34.4.2; see Woodman 1996: 390 and 391-392 for further information regarding the use of medical vocabulary observed in this passage.
37. The moral decline of social and political structures is often metaphorically linked to physical and mental illnesses. Cf. Sallust *Bellum Catilinae* 10.6 *Haec primo paulatim crescere, interdum vindicari; post, ubi contagio quasi pestilentia invasit, civitas inmutata, imperium ex iustissumo atque optumo crudele intolerandumque factum.* See Ramsey 2007: 86.
38. Tac. *Ann*. 3.54 *set si quis legem sanciat, poenas indicat, idem illi civitatem verti, splendidissimo cuique exitium parari, neminem criminis expertem clamitabunt* [...] *tot a maioribus repertae leges, tot quas divus Augustus tulit, illae oblivione, hae, quod flagitiosius est, contemptu abolitae securiorem luxum fecere.* Cf. Suetonius *De Vitis Caesarum, Divus Augustus* 34.1, Gellius *Noctes Atticae* 2.24.14. Tiberius refers to Augustus' *Lex Iulia*, which limited the amount of money that could be spent on organising symposia. Woodman 1996: 392. Cf. Bhatt 2017: 312. According to Tiberius, the *leges sumptuariae*, while restricting *luxuria*, primarily affected the most prominent of the state by criminalising widespread social practices.

He alludes here to the earlier *lex Oppia* (215 BC), which restricted Roman women's use of jewellery and elaborate dress, and to the *lex Orchia* (182 BC), the earliest legislation explicitly aimed at limiting the expenditure banquets.[39]

At this point, it is worth briefly addressing paragraphs 3.32–35, which concern the luxury of Roman women and the *lex Oppia*. These sections appear, at first glance, thematically disconnected from the main discussion,[40] since Libo and the other senators clearly had different manifestations of *luxuria* in mind when they initiated the debate. However, the reason for introducing the discussion of women and their relationship to luxury is to highlight the influence, positive or negative, that women have on their male husbands. After all, as Messalina claims, Rome is a place of evil, dangerous for women who stay behind while their husbands are in the camps. This idea prevails when reference is made in the Senate to the dubious life of women.[41] The point is that women, either through their indulgent lifestyle during peacetime or through their fear and anxiety during wartime, might draw their husbands away from military service, leading men to neglect or even abandon their military obligations.[42]

As far as the female gender is concerned, luxurious lifestyle is also associated with ambition (*ambitiosum*) and the pursuit of power and prestige (*potestatis avidum*), both in private life, at home, and in public life, since they had gained a voice in the courts, even in military matters (*nunc vinclis exolutis domos, fora, iam et exercitus regerent* 3. 33). Greed, combined in this passage with ambition - which brings us back to Sallust's position - is now also characteristic for women (*at quasdam in ambitionem aut avaritiam prolapsas* 3.34). It is also interesting to note the parallel between female luxury and the oriental element (*Romanum agmen ad similitudinem barbari incessus convertant* 3.33), an observation which confirms that *luxuria* is foreign and therefore alien to the *mores* of the *populus Romanus* - hence women had now acquired rights and a voice in areas where

39. For the *lex oppia* see Livy *Ab Urbe Condita* 34.1-8. See White 2014:127; Zanda 2011: 50-52.
40. This is not to suggest a later interpolation, but rather a thematic shift within the narrative.
41. Tacitus *Annales* 2.34 *sic obviam irent iis quae alibi peccarentur ut flagitiorum urbis meminissent.*
42. Woodman 2004: 102.

only men were distinguished.[43] Finally, it is noted that the *lex Oppia* was introduced in response to the civic conditions of the 3rd century BC. However, it was later repealed or significantly relaxed in order to accommodate the evolving interests of Roman state.

Tiberius' allusion to the ineffective earlier legislation on *luxuria* is followed by a brief recapitulation of the *mos maiorum* at a time when *parsimonia* was the main force (*parsimonia pollebat* 3.54).[44] This was because, at the time, individuals had the ability to restrain themselves from insatiable pleasures (*moderabatur* 3.54), unlike during the reign of Tiberius, when Rome's territorial expansion and civil wars led the citizens to indulge in excess. Although Tiberius acknowledges *luxuria* as a foreign element[45] — thereby casting Rome's external contacts in a negative light — he cannot ignore the role that such relations played in shaping the internal economy[46] and reinforcing social stratification.[47] His attitude toward *luxuria* is thus markedly different from that of a *princeps* advocating *antiqua parsimonia*,[48] on the one hand, and from the principles laid out by Sallust and Livy, on the other. Tiberius neither mourns the loss of traditional restraint nor explicitly condemns or defends luxury. On the contrary, he recognises, first, that *luxuria* has already been normalised and, second, that any attempt to reimpose traditional standards would create deep contradictions in his own political conduct.[49] Social order and stability now

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43. Of particular interest is the case of Sempronia, whose lifestyle reflected masculine characteristics and could only be supported by men. She had indulged in debauchery, *luxuria*, the constant search for money and fame (*pecuniae*, *famae*) and sexual urges (*lubido*). Cf. Sallust *Bellum Catilinae* 25. Cf. White 2014: 118. The pursuit of wealth is directly linked to lust (*libido, voluptas*) and adultery (*adulteria*). For further information, see Boyd 1987, where Sempronia is the female antagonist of Catiline and embodies the moral decadence of Rome. Her aggressive traits mimic masculine qualities, while Catiline and his followers exhibit effeminacy. Boyd .1987: 184-186.

44. Cf. Livy *Ab Urbe Condita Praef*. 11 and 34.4.6-7.

45. Cf. Cicero *De Re Publica* 2.7-8 regarding the introduction of foreign and contagious ideas about luxury. Cf. Pliny the Elder *Naturalis Historia* 33.148-150. Cf. Woodman 1996: 394; Zanda 2011: 9-10.

46. Tacitus *Annales* 3.54 *at hercule nemo refert quod Italia externae opis indiget, quod vita populi Romani per incerta maris et tempestatum cotidie volvitur. ac nisi provinciarum copiae et dominis et servitiis et agris subvenerint, nostra nos scilicet nemora nostraeque villae tuebuntur*.

47. Tacitus *Annales* 3.54 *nos* [i.e. the senators] *pudor, pauperes necessitas, divites satias in melius mutet*. Cf. Woodman 1996: 398.

48. Tacitus *Annales* 3.52. Cf. Suetonius *De Vitis Caesarum, Tiberius* 34.1 *ut parsimoniam publicam exemplo quoque iuvaret*, where Tiberius is also presented by Suetonius as a model of traditional austerity.

49. Bhatt 2017: 327.

depend on luxury rather than moderation, and the *princeps* must adapt accordingly to this new reality.[50]

Tacitus' perspective on *luxuria*

Under Tiberius' Principate, the *Princeps* tacitly accepted corruption as a tool for maintaining state order;[51] it is a formative and authoritative instrument, acceptable to the authorities. It is taken for granted that wealth brings profit. Tacitus and Tiberius may therefore be aware of the *utilitas* of certain defects in social and state structures, such as the defective element of *luxuria* and *avaritia* in Roman society. Tacitus therefore does not lament the loss of the traditional *frugalitas* and *parsimonia*. At the end of Tiberius' letter, Tacitus takes the opportunity to give a more general assessment of *luxuria* and its related legislation over the centuries, going back to his own time and deliberately breaking the time limits of the *Annals* (3.55). The discussion of *luxuria* prompts Tacitus to comment on his own years in the context of a more general account of political crisis and moral decline as the result of widespread luxury.[52] The historian bluntly states that luxury, and in particular luxurious banquets (*luxusque mensae*), were practised with unbridled extravagance for a hundred years, from the Battle of Actium to the civil wars that brought Galba to power (68-69 AD), after which their glory gradually began to fade.[53]

As we have seen above, Tiberius does not consider the issue of *luxus mensae* worthy of official intervention. A similar position of neutrality — or at least a non-hostile attitude toward luxurious living — may also be attributed to Tacitus himself. In *Annals* 3.55, where

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50. Bhatt 2017: 328. Cf. Livy *Ab Urbe Condita Praef*. 11 and Sallust *Bellum Catilinae* 13 where *parsimonia* is a guide to stability and lack of *modestia* is associated with crime and evil deeds (*facinora*).
51. Tacitus *Annales* 3.25 *utque antehac flagitiis ita tunc legibus laborabatur*. Cf. also the increased activity of the *delatores*, which, combined with the severity of criminal charges and the increased role of the *amicitia*, reveals the corruption of the legal system and judicial procedures during the reign of Tiberius. Cf. Bhatt 2017: 314-315.
52. Woodman 1996: 377-378.
53. Tacitus *Annales* 3.55 *luxusque mensae a fine Actiaci belli ad ea arma quis Servius Galba rerum adeptus est per annos centum profusis sumptibus exerciti paulatim exolevere.*

he appears to offer his own retrospective assessment, Tacitus presents *luxuria* as a recurring feature of Roman life rather than as an urgent moral crisis. Unlike Sallust and Livy, who consistently frame *luxuria* as a driving cause of political and social decline, Tacitus adopts a more nuanced perspective, possibly suggesting that he viewed it less as a direct causal factor and more as a conventional historiographical topos. His account of the century between Actium and Galba — a period marked by conspicuous consumption among Rome's elite — seems to recognise the rhetorical utility of *luxuria* as a narrative device, rather than an absolute indicator of decadence or collapse.[54] After the reigns of Tiberius, Claudius and Caligula, however, the cultural and social landscape began to shift.[55] The *novi homines*, men who did not belong to the old aristocratic families but had risen through personal merit and fortune (*fortuna vel industria*), became prominent, advocating for a return to *domesticam parsimoniam* as a means of distinguishing themselves within a changing elite.[56]

Tacitus concludes this episode with a reference to Vespasian, under whose reign (69-79 AD) he became active as a historian. The emperor is presented as a model of the old manners (*antiquo ipse cultu victuque*).[57] Tacitus closes by emphasising that as times change, so too do people's customs, subtly alluding to the instability and relativity of moral standards. This reference to cyclical change challenges rigid distinctions between morality and corruption, especially given the frequent overlap between moral and immoral behaviour in Roman public life. Tacitus thus invites reflection on the evolving relationship between moral and political virtues, rather than on strictly moral or corrupt acts. He implies that traditional virtues such as *moderatio*, *frugalitas*, *parsimonia*, and *disciplina* have, in

54. Tacitus *Annales* 3.55 *ut quisque opibus domo paratu speciosus per nomen et clientelas inlustrior habebatur*.
55. See Woodman 1996: 404-405.
56. See Woodman 1996: 405.
57. Tacitus *Annales* 3. 55 *simul novi homines e municipiis et coloniis atque etiam provinciis in senatum crebro adsumpti domesticam parsimoniam intulerunt, et quamquam fortuna vel industria plerique pecuniosam ad senectam pervenirent, mansit tamen prior animus.* Cf. Levick 1982: 60. Tacitus says exactly the same of Pison, Galba's successor (and of Galba himself) in the first book of *Historiae*: 1.14 *vultu habituque moris antiqui et aestimatione recta severus*.

terms of *utilitas*, been supplanted by political behaviours such as *ambitio*, *avaritia*, and *luxuria*.[58]

This final observation underscores a key contrast with Livy, whose conception of *luxuria* is embedded in a linear narrative of moral and civic decline. While Livy portrays *luxuria* as a corrosive foreign import that undermines Rome's republican virtues, Tacitus presents it as a politically functional and historically embedded phenomenon — a force that, although morally ambiguous, plays an integral role in the structure of imperial power. This contrast becomes even sharper when compared to Sallust, who treats *luxuria* as an unequivocally destructive moral vice. In *Bellum Catilinae*, *luxuria* is closely linked with *ambitio* and *avaritia*, forming a triad of corruption that emasculates Roman *virtus* and accelerates political collapse. Unlike Tacitus, who explores the institutional utility of such vices within the Principate, Sallust offers a rigidly moralistic framework, in which *luxuria* is incompatible with both personal integrity and the health of the state.

Conclusion

This article has examined the semantic evolution of the concept of luxury (*luxus*, *luxuria*) in Roman literature and, more specifically, in selected historiographical works from the 2nd century BC to the 1st century AD, up to the Principate of Tiberius. While not an exhaustive survey of the historiographical tradition, the analysis has focused on Sallust, Livy, and Tacitus, whose texts provide representative insights into how *luxuria* was conceptualised as a corrosive moral force and, later, as a functional component of imperial power structures. The notable difference between Tacitus' perspective and that of earlier historians lies in the fact that, in the *Annals*, he presents forms of deviant behaviour as central to the construction of the political identity of the elite (*nobilitas*) and their ascent to power. Although such behaviour is morally and ethically reprehensible, and traditionally held responsible for the erosion of the state's harmony and 'health', Tacitus interprets its function within the framework of institutional stability, portraying it as a

58. Bhatt 2017: 313.

necessary and coherent element of civic and political order.[59] One could argue that Tacitus moves beyond the concept's purely negative connotations and seeks to explain its persistent presence across the centuries by examining its economic, political, and social utility. It is therefore difficult to maintain that, for Tacitus, corruption merely signals a decline in morality or an attack on the identity of the political community. Instead, in Tiberian Rome, corruption is not only tolerated by social institutions, but also embedded within them, operating in a normative and authoritative capacity across the Roman state.

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59. Bhatt 2017: 311-313, 325-329.

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