The interaction between ‘history’ and ‘story’ in Roman historiography: the rhetorical construction of the historical image of Nero

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ABSTRACT
This paper examines the way in which ancient historiography makes use of rhetorical and even fictional devices (dramatic poetry as well as the novel) to dramatize in writing down events which the historians obviously consider as being important for their judgement, ideologically or otherwise biased, of historical personalities. An outstanding example for this narrative method is the Roman author most often thought of as one of the greatest historians in all antiquity: Tacitus. It can be shown that he in those of the books of his Annals which concern the reign of Nero makes use of rumours, insinuations and even fictional elements, especially of the ancient novel and novella (examples for this will be taken mostly from Ann. XIII–XVI), and particularly with regard to Nero’s relationship with his mother, Agrippina.

A memorable spectacle
In the year 66 AD, a memorable spectacle took place in Rome:

I may fairly include among his shows the entrance of Tiridates into the city. He was a king of Armenia, whom Nero induced by great promises to come to Rome; and since he was prevented by bad weather from exhibiting him to the people on the day appointed by proclamation, he produced him at the first favourable opportunity, with the praetorian cohorts drawn up in full armour about the temples in the Forum, while he himself sat in a curule chair on the rostra in the attire of a triumphing general, surrounded by military ensigns and standards. As the king approached along a sloping platform, the emperor at first let him fall at his feet, but raised him with his right hand and kissed him. Then, while the king made supplication, Nero took the turban from his head and replaced it with a diadem [as a sign of royal dignity, as it was common in the Hellenistic monarchies; see below note i], while a man of praetorian rank translated the words of the suppliant and proclaimed him to the throng. From there the king was taken to the theatre, and when he had again done obeisance, Nero gave him a seat at his right hand. Because of all this Nero was hailed as Imperator, and after depositing a
laurel wreath in the Capitol, he closed the two doors of the temple of Janus, as a sign that no war was left anywhere. (Suetonius, Nero 13)\(^1\)

With this symbolic action, Nero, the infamous ‘artist on the imperial throne’, actually delivered the Roman Empire from the nightmare of a war that had been raging on the Empire’s sensitive eastern border for eight years; and he resolved a conflict, inherited from his predecessors, that had been smouldering for almost 100 years. For so long Rome and the powerful, culturally high-standing Parthian (or Persian) empire had been fighting over the clientele kingdom of Armenia between them, with varying success (Barrett, Fantham, and Yardley et al. 2016, 77–117; Malitz 2016, 61–63; Sonnabend 2016, 191–195). In the 50s, under Nero’s immediate predecessor Claudius, the conflict had reached a new stage of escalation: in the year 51 the Roman-friendly king Mithridates had been overthrown by a coup (Tacitus, Ann. 12.44) and the Parthians took this occasion to intervene militarily in the turmoil and to bring their own candidate, Tiridates, to power (Tacitus, Ann. 12.50). Now Armenia seemed to come under permanent influence of the powerful eastern neighbour, since Tiridates was none other than the brother of the reigning king of Parthia/Persia, Vologeses I; both belonged to the Arsacid dynasty, reigning since 240 B.C. in the Persian empire. In Rome, the alarm bells were ringing permanently, as it were; the Empire’s fragile eastern border – Asia Minor, Syria, the economically significant connections via the caravan routes to the Arabian Peninsula – all of a sudden seemed to be severely threatened. So when Nero came to power a little later (54 AD), he felt compelled to act decisively. The youthful age of the just 17-year-old princeps was seen by some Romans as a problem in this situation (Tacitus, Ann. 13.6).\(^2\) In any case, the young regent goes to work with youthful energy, has a large army of Roman legions and allied troops assembled and commissions Gnaeus Domitius Corbulo, an experienced commander and at that time governor in Asia Minor, to lead the military operations (Tacitus, Ann. 13.6–8; s. Geiser 2007, 42–51; Malitz 2016, 62–64). Surprisingly, however, he initially seeks a political solution to the conflict rather than a military one, contrary to Roman tradition:

Meantime both [Roman commanders] sent messages to king Vologeses, advising him to choose peace rather than war, and to give hostages and so continue the habitual reverence of his ancestors towards the people of Rome. (Tacitus, Ann. 13.9.1)

According to Tacitus (Ann. 13.37), it is certainly Tiridates who, by his action against pro-Romans in Armenia, provokes the final escalation. In spring 58 the Roman army is ready to start the fighting. After the fall of the Armenian capital, a Roman-friendly Cappadocian prince is appointed as Tigranes VI (Tacitus, Ann. 13.41, 14.23 and 14.26; Cassius Dio, Hist. Rom. 62.19). Vologeses is at this point, due to inner turmoil, unable to decisively counter Roman advance. Only a military invasion of Tigranes in Parthia in the year 61 urges him to counterattack (Tacitus, Ann. 15.1; Cassius Dio, Hist. Rom. 62.20, 2–4). Again the fortunes of war change back and forth until a Roman army is defeated in autumn 62 at Rhandeia on the Euphrates and forced to capitulate (Tacitus, Ann. 15.24; Cassius Dio, Hist. Rom. 62.21 seq.). Armenia seems lost to the Romans, but with support from Rome Corbulo, now governor of Syria, succeeds in bringing a new strong army into position against the Parthians. The insight into the military stalemate between the two great powers forces the parties to the negotiating table (Tacitus,
Then the Roman [Corbulo] commended the young prince [Tiridates] for abandoning rash courses, and adopting a safe and expedient policy. Tiridates first dwelt much on the nobility of his race, but went on to speak in a tone of moderation. He would go to Rome, and bring the emperor a new glory, a suppliant Arsacid, while Parthia was prosperous. It was then agreed that Tiridates should lay down his royal crown before Caesar’s image, and resume it only from the hand of Nero. (Tacitus, Ann. 15.29.1; cf. Cassius Dio, Hist. Rom. 62.23.1–4)

Armenia remains under the rule of the Parthian Arsacid dynasty, in the person of Tiridates I; but the old-new Armenian king has to be crowned in Rome by the princeps Nero and thus at least de iure recognize Roman supremacy over Armenia. Whatever effects this had de facto, from Rome’s perspective a war full of losses in people and resources, which could not be won by any side militarily, ended with a face-saving political result. This in the eyes of the insightful among those concerned might have been worth the high costs which the ‘spectacle’ of the royal visit to Rome caused. And indeed peace with the Parthian Empire lasts until Trajan’s invasion of 114, that is, almost 50 years – longer than ever before in the eventful Roman-Parthian history since the final phase of the republic.

**Nero’s foreign policy and its critics**

One should now think that this result would have certainly cast a positive light on the foreign policy of the young princeps Nero in historiography. In this historical episode, we do not get to know him as an aggressive militarist who strives for war and conquest at all costs. This applies far more to other of his predecessors, for example to Caesar in Gaul (58–50 BC), but also to the allegedly ‘weak’ Claudius with the conquest of Britain (from 43 AD onwards), and to one of his successors, the optimus princeps Trajan, who is predominantly positively assessed but on whose account there are several long-standing wars with quite doubtful results (two wars against the Dacians in today’s Romania 101/2 and 105/6 AD as well as a renewed war with the Parthian Empire 113–116 AD). On the other hand, the twice-shown openness for political solutions and compromises results neither from weakness nor from a fundamental pacifism: in Tacitus’ detailed description it is somewhat lost that Nero played a significant role in the decision to counter the military advantage of the Parthians created by Rhandeia not only with diplomacy, but also with a demonstration of military strength (in modern terms a ‘surge’ of troop power on the ground), and thus not to give up on Armenia as lost to Rome from the outset:

Then was perceived the mockery of the barbarians in petitioning for what they had wrested from us, and Nero consulted with the chief men of the State whether they should accept a dangerous war or a disgraceful peace. There was no hesitation about war. (Tacitus, Ann. 15.25.2)

The valuations of ancient and modern historians, however, are quite different than one might expect: Half a century later, Suetonius already speaks of ‘a shameful defeat in the Orient, in consequence of which the legions in Armenia were sent under the
yoke and Syria was all but lost’ (Suetonius, Nero 39.1), without mentioning in this context the historical compromise of 63, which he certainly not by chance places in a distant part of his biography of Nero (see the beginning of the article); and he expresses as his basic view that the emperor was ‘far from being actuated by any wish or hope of increasing or extending the empire’ (Suetonius, Nero 18.1). The late antique historian Festus (4th century A.D.) grumbles: ‘Nero, the vilest imperator the Roman state has endured, lost Armenia’ (Festus, Breviarium 2001). And the historians of modern times too at best concede incompetence and disinterest to Nero:

Die Stilisierung der Einsetzung des Königs von Armenien in Rom war meisterhaft, der politische Gehalt dieses Kompromisses dürfte [!] Nero überhaupt nicht interessiert haben. [The stylisation of the installation of the King of Armenia in Rome was masterful, the political content of this compromise would not [!] have interested Nero at all.] (Christ 2009, 230, cf. also 235)

To give also an example of a rather popular reception of the antique descriptions, which precisely because of its not too academic style is particularly well received by those who want a quick and easily accessible overview of the subject: the Wikipedia article on the ‘Roman-Parthian War’ says:

Nero celebrated this peace as a major achievement: he was hailed as imperator and held a triumph, although no new territory had been won, and the peace reflected a compromise rather than a true victory. For although Rome could prevail militarily in Armenia, politically, she had no genuine alternatives to the Arsacid candidacy on offer for the Armenian throne. Armenia would henceforth be ruled by an Iranian dynasty, and despite its nominal allegiance to Rome, it would come under increasing Parthian influence. In the judgment of later generations, Nero had lost Armenia, and although the Peace of Rhandeia ushered in a period of relatively peaceful relations that would last for 50 years, Armenia would continue to be a constant bone of contention between the Romans, the Parthians, and their Sassanid successors.6

Here the fly in the ointment is obviously being sought. The fact that a half-century period of peace, and thus calm and stability in Roman-Parthian relations, had entered this endangered part of the Roman border, certainly in the eyes of the Roman decision-makers outweighed the advantages of a possible direct Roman supremacy over Armenia. That certainly would have provided for more and more lasting tensions with the Parthian Empire and, when it was tried out under Trajan, could not be maintained after all (Strobel 2010, 392–398). When a more recent overall view of Neronian foreign policy also asserts that the aim of the Tiridates ceremony would have been:

vor der heimischen Öffentlichkeit den Schein des Erfolges aufrechtzuerhalten … In Wahrheit verfügte Tiridates bereits über das, worum er bat [to maintain the appearance of success before the public at home … in truth, Tiridates already had what he asked for] (Heil 1997, p. 139)

–then the question arises as to why the Parthian prince has at all engaged in the humiliating and at the same time personally exhausting ritual of submission.

A major stumbling block for the modern as well as for the ancient critics is the sentence ‘although no new territory had been won’, which also corresponds to Suetonius’ accusation quoted above (Suetonius, Nero 18.1). Only in this case, according to a view shared by some historians, would Nero have had the right to sit enthroned ‘in the attire
of a triumphing general’, as Suetonius’ description of the coronation ceremony states. Instead, the ‘disgraceful’ compromise peace with the Parthians already in antiquity brings him into the disrepute of himself being a friend of the barbarians (discussed in Lefebvre 2017, 230 seq. and 261 seq.). In this, as in many other points, Nero had simply not conformed to Roman tradition; the time between the young princeps taking office and the spectacular peace agreement, almost Nero’s entire rule, had seen a lot of events that made him one of the most bizarre and monstrous figures in world history in the eyes of many (though not all!) contemporaries.

Nero – a crazy tyrant? The rhetorical construction of a historical image

Basically this picture has held up to this day. By popular perception of the Roman Imperial period Nero is regarded as the crazy tyrant par excellence; this is all the more true when this view is further clouded by modern distortions of film and historical novel literature. But also the power exercised by the images of the despotistic principes of that epoch, which were designed by a Tacitus or a Suetonius, should still not be underestimated despite centuries of critical examination and partial revision. All these historians and biographers display a high degree of rhetorical artistry. And precisely this is the subject of a controversy that already in antiquity goes back at least to Plato (cf. Apol. 18b) – rhetoric may very well serve to conceal the truth, the ‘factual’, precisely when it is in the service of the bias of the author in question (see most recently Kugelmeier 2017).

Suetonius’ chapter on the coronation of Tiridates provides a good example of this type of rhetorical stylization. Of relevance is the fact that Suetonius does not mention the event as one of Nero’s political achievements, but ‘among his shows’. So that—by the way also by using the at least ambiguous verb producere ‘stage the performance’ (Cicero, Rosc. com. 30) – the biographer suggests right at the beginning what his readers associate directly with these ‘shows’: the emperor as a performer, vain, hollow, unworthy of both his status and the Roman tradition in general – so they get to know him throughout from the descriptions not only in Suetonius, but also in the ‘serious’ historian Tacitus. Such descriptions occupy a large space in the work of both. After all that has been said it is not surprising that newer research also emphasizes this ‘show’ character of the event, see Sonnabend 2016, 199, speaking of a ‘Theaterstück mit dem Titel “Nero empfängt Tiridates”’ [play entitled “Nero Receives Tiridates”]; Champlin 2005, 75: ‘brilliantly captures Nero’s merging of life and art’ as well as 127 and 222–229 on the careful ‘staging’, which even took into account weather phenomena such as the position of the sun, and the rhetorical arrangement of the decisive exchange of words between Nero and Tiridates at the coronation ceremony, which was not left to chance either (see also Sonnabend 2016, 195–201). Nevertheless, it is again Tacitus who attributes a certain substance to the ‘show’: ‘Accustomed, forsooth, to foreign arrogance, he had no knowledge of us, who value the reality of empire and disregard its empty show’ (Ann. 15.31, on Tiridates).

Suetonius points to the enormous costs here as well as throughout (‘whom Nero induced by great promises to come to Rome’; see above p. 5). Basically, one could see the ‘great spectacle’ itself as rhetoric, not as a linguistic design, but as an effective
communication between the Roman leadership elite and the Roman people by means of the most elaborate and emphatic elements of signs and gestures. With the mention of the ‘strong fog’ follows another element of the rhetorical presentation strategy, which Suetonius as well as Tacitus like to use: the negative evaluation of the event by *omina* or *prodigia* (meaningful miraculous signs). Even the ‘serious’ Tacitus lets such appearances flow into his representation at the suitable places, cf. *Ann.* 15.22:

During the same consulship [of P. Marius and L. Afinius, 62 A.D.] a gymnasium was wholly consumed by a stroke of lightning, and a statue of Nero within it was melted down to a shapeless mass of bronze.

Here, the naming of the ominous sign suggests that Nero’s Parthian policy in general stands under such an ominous star (in addition two events are mentioned which are in fact in no way connected: an earthquake in Pompeii and the death of a Vestal Virgin). He also uses a similar technique (among many other places) in the events after Nero’s murder of his mother Agrippina in 59 AD:

There occurred too a thick succession of portents, which meant nothing. A woman gave birth to a snake, and another was killed by a thunderbolt in her husband’s embrace. Then the sun was suddenly darkened and the fourteen districts of the city were struck by lightning (*Ann.* 14.12; here too he ominously foreshadows a later event, the fire of Rome described in the 15th book).

Tacitus then hurries to insure immediately afterwards:

‘All this happened quite without any providential design; so much so, that for many subsequent years Nero prolonged his reign and his crimes.’

But the scepticism of the Roman historian against his own rhetoric did not get caught up in the history of reception. When looking through some textbooks one still finds the mentioned ancient authors in nice regularity as the crown witnesses for allegedly established historical facts mentioned; the doubt, which is nevertheless expressed again and again in historical and philological research literature for quite some time and in so many different ways, can, at any rate, still not finally make itself heard; see for example Schlüter (2009, 236):

In der römischen Geschichtsschreibung wird er als übler Despot geschildert, dem die ungeheure Machtfülle, die ein römischer Kaiser hatte, zu Kopf gestiegen war ("Cäsarenwahn") [In Roman historiography he [Nero] is portrayed as an evil despot; the enormous power of a Roman emperor had gone to his head ("monarchic delusion")].

Recent scholarly accounts show at least greater caution; see for example Christ (2009, 232), who states that there are ‘keinerlei Beweise’ [no proofs] for Nero’s alleged guilt for the burning of Rome and also for the rumour that he had recited a poem on the fall of Troy in front of the backdrop of the burning city (a scene that the 1951 movie *Quo vadis* so effectively visualizes, thus making a considerable contribution to the modern image of Nero). Christ says: ‘die Gerüchte dokumentieren lediglich, daß man Nero beides zutraute’ [the rumours merely document that Nero was considered capable of both]. For Christ, however, it is also certain:

Klaren Blick für politische, militärische, gesellschaftliche oder wirtschaftliche Realitäten besaß er nicht, eine ernstzunehmende politische Konzeption hat er nicht entwickelt.
[He did not have a clear eye for political, military, social or economic realities; he did not develop a serious political concept.] (Christ 2009, 242)

This pejorative tendency in the assessment of Nero and his politics still forms the basic tenor, at least in German-language ancient historical research: Bellen (2010, 63) writes without further reflection of ‘Neros schändlichem Treiben’ [Nero’s shameful activities]; Huttner (2013, 286) emphasizes the ‘mäßigenden Einfluss seiner Berater’ [moderating influence of his advisors], although, for example, Seneca’s role in the death of Agrippina is clearly questionable (see Kugelmeier 2013a, 2017, 329 with note 12). In the most recent research, however, more and more differentiating voices are heard. After all, Sonnabend (2016, 202) judges a tangible result of the compromise confirmed by the coronation, the reconstruction of the Armenian capital Artaxata destroyed in the war by Tiridates, as follows:

Dass er dafür überhaupt die Erlaubnis einholen musste, zeigt im Übrigen, dass die mit der Krönung verbundenen politischen Kompetenzen eher bescheiden waren. [The fact that he [Tiridates] had to ask for permission to do so shows, incidentally, that his political powers associated with the coronation were rather modest.]

It has long since become apparent how much caution would be in order with regard to ancient historiographical texts; for this is not just a question of a fair assessment of long since deceased persons, but of much more: whether the image we receive originates from a cleverly conceived design strategy, which in turn serves the political-ideological or simply personal bias of the author. More precisely, one should no longer focus on the question of whether one can believe everything from the main sources (Tacitus, Suetonius and Cassius Dio) – that this is not the case has long since been established – but rather why one still has the impression that we have to believe the story(s) told by historians, who apparently do their work so brilliantly, why it is so difficult to free oneself from the spell of a well-written portrayal, which pretends to be a representation of reality. This applies primarily to Tacitus, who is widely regarded as the most important and most serious Roman historian. In the case of Suetonius, the reserve is greater from the outset due to the sheer abundance of anecdotes, which he obviously presents in a tendentious way, and in the case of Cassius Dios’ quite negative description of Nero’s reign, the temporal distance from the reported events alone already advises caution.11

**Facts or fiction? Post-truth in the Roman historians**

In some cases, it can even be shown that the *facta* depicted are tendentiously reinterpreted by deliberate recourse to *ficta*; where it is bound to be particularly dramatic, the compositions of both Suetonius and Tacitus are sometimes fed directly from the sources of dramatic poetry and novels. See, for example, the Empress’s last words in Tacitus’ account of the murder of Agrippina: ‘Then, as the centurion bared his sword for the fatal deed, presenting her person, she exclaimed, “ventrem feri – Smite my womb!”’ (Ann. 14.8.5). (This was a charge against Nero, the son whom she carried in her womb – *venter* – and who now is causing her death).
Here the historian apparently draws on the drama Octavia handed down under Seneca’s name:

The dying misfortunate asks her executioner to sink the vile sword in her womb, saying: “Stab here with your steel, here – where this monstrosity was born.” (Oct. 368–372)

Cassius Dio later even explicitly provides this additional, clarifying reasoning: ‘Strike here … strike here, for this bore Nero’ (Dio 61.13.5).

In its brevity, pregnant with meaning, the saying, as given by Tacitus, is only understandable if read on the background of an already known (pre-) text. For Tacitus omits the explaining addition ‘translated’ by Dio; for him the brief allusion to an apparently known and more detailed formulation was probably sufficient. Of all the texts that have been preserved to us, only the Octavia can be considered for this (see most recently Kugelmeier 2017, 332–338).

Rumours and literary allusions of this kind – these are the means that ancient historians and biographers gladly and extensively use to underpin a certain tendency of their historical views. In this way, Suetonius and the ‘serious’ historian Tacitus also create their depictions of Nero, who is thus portrayed by all the means of rhetorical art as the topical and typical tyrant, addicted to hybris, without any political insight or sense of responsibility towards the res publica, but with a delusional tendency towards theatrical self-portrayal (see Lefebvre 2017, 269). This fictional kind of artistically designed historiography should not be regarded as a historical credible basis for our factual knowledge of the epoch of Nero. By no means is the objectivity of a historian who fulfils his duty as a chronicler to be admired here, but rather the success of such a simple and yet, as the history of reception shows, so effective manipulation.

Such a method not only has serious consequences for the investigation of historical facts of antiquity, but we have to reckon with a partly conscious, rhetorically manipulated blurring of the difference between ficta and facta up to the present day (and lately intensified still by the emergence of rampant new media). This is shown by examples from recent times such as certain media representations of the events around September 11, 2001, which, incidentally, not infrequently reverted to antiquity and its historical rhetoric. For example, the equation of US President George W. Bush with Nero was widespread above all in cartoons: Just as the Roman emperor set the city of Rome on fire for selfish motives, so the president had kindled ‘the devastating fire of war’ in the Middle East (in some publications it was even suggested that it was his government that had staged the attacks in New York); he, too, thus, represented the type of the ultimately insane tyrant. The image created with these means replaced in large parts of the public only too soon more rational analyses of US politics; the power of the rhetorically appealing fictional construct suppressed and superimposed itself on the less spectacular facts (see Kugelmeier 2013b, 705 and Kugelmeier 2017, 341 seq.). This seems to correspond to a timeless human need – mundus vult decipi ‘the world wants to be beguiled’.

Notes

1. For the significance of the diadem see Ritter (1965). on Armenia, in particular 165 seq. and on further diadem coronations of Parthian princes by Roman principes 168; see also
Tacitus (1952), Ann. 13.7.1 on two further oriental kings to whom Nero also bestows their dominions with ‘rulers’ insignia’ – *cum insignibus regis mandat*.

2. Cf. also the scene with his mother Agrippina and the Armenian legation which Tacitus obviously places in this context immediately before by intention, *Tacitus, Ann.* 13.5.

3. For the careful ‘staging’ on this occasion see also Champlin (2005, 221 seq.), Malitz (2016, 64–67) and Sonnabend (2016, 195).

4. For which cf. the even more detailed description of the event and the exact sums given by the later historian Cassius Dio (1914), *Hist. Rom.* 63.1–7 as well as Suetonius, *Nero* 30.2 and Pliny, *Nat. hist.* 33.54, who, by the way, in 30.16 speaks of an *Armeniacus ... triumphus*; see Champlin (2005, 227) with note 27, who estimates the outlay as at least 300 million sesterces = approx. 75 million e; Lefebvre (2017, 214) points to the mental association consciously aspired to similar ‘waste’ under Caligula, see also 230.

5. See Holland (2006, 202): ‘the display of wealth and power impressed the visitors to an extent that was to pay a long-term diplomatic dividend’; Malitz (2016, 67): ‘geschickte Ausnutzung einer für Rom keineswegs vorteilhaften Situation’ [skilful exploitation of a situation by no means advantageous for Rome] as well as 92 and 114 seq. for the thoroughly positive immediate reactions both in Rome and in Parthia.

6. For the URL see: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roman%E2%80%93Parthian_War_of_58%E2%80%9363 Accessed June 5, 2019

7. Cf. *Tacitus, Ann.* 12.20, Valerius Maximus, *Fact. dict. mem.* 2.8.4; see, however, the sceptical remarks on the universality of this demand made by Mary Beard (2007) 211, there also 271 seq. especially for the Tiridates episode; Barrett, Fantham, and Yardley et al. 2016, 243 seq. with note 23; see most recently Tanja Itgenshorst (2016), “Die Transformation des Triumphes in augusteischer Zeit,” in *Der Römische Triumph in Prinzipat Und Spätantike* edited by Fabian Goldbeck and Johannes Wienand, pages 64 and 75. See also Fabian Goldbeck, “Die Triumphfe der julisch-claudischen Zeit,” in the same volume, pages 115–118.

8. For the most recent study see Kugelmeier (2013b and 2017, 327 seq.) and the study by Lefebvre (2017).

9. The most recent presentation on this subject can be found in Lefebvre (2017, 267–272).

10. For the Middle Ages, studied in detail in the works of Gerd Althoff, see Althoff and Witthöft 2004; for antiquity, see Flaig (2005).

11. With regard to Corbulo, see especially Geiser (2007, 14).

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**Notes on contributor**

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