

Past-and-Future Background Briefing:

## Tacitus and the Roman Empire: The Master of Ironic History

By Dr R. James Ferguson

### Abstract

One of the most significant sources on the early Roman Empire and the emergence of the imperial system is the writer Tacitus, whose narrative of moral decline in the early empire has shaped much modern research and most contemporary fiction. Tacitus (circa 56-103 CE) lived under the imperial system and benefited from it, being appointed to high offices such as the quaestorship and the consulship, though he remained highly critical of the character of emperors such as Tiberius, Caligula, Nero and Domitian. His earlier works included a panegyric biography of his father-in-law, the *Agricola*, though this was largely a critique of the emperor Domitian in contrast to following reigns. Tacitus wrote a study of the German tribes, the *Germanica*, using this to show the decline of Roman virtue and liberty. Likewise, the *Dialogus* is a study of the decline and corruption of rhetoric from republican times, since the political system no longer allowed independent and competitive disputation. Tacitus's historical works (the *Histories* and the *Annals*) deepen this analysis of the dangers of autocracy and the enfeeblement of the senate, providing a detailed 'thick description' that ironically deconstructs the nature of authority in the imperial age. Tacitus reveals a complex political, moral and religious viewpoint that recognises both necessity and aspiration. He left behind a detailed account of the problems associated with one-man rule in the early Roman Empire, including its often-unrestrained use of violence and power.

### Topics:

- *Introduction: Imperial Chronology*
- *Tacitus the Man*
- *Early Monographs*
- *A Brief Assessment of the Histories*
- *The Annals as History and Ironic Biography*
- *The Unique Perspective of Tacitus*

### 1. Introduction: Imperial Chronology

Publius Cornelius Tacitus, living circa 56-130 CE, is one of the main historical sources for the early Roman Empire. Indeed, the modern critical narrative of early empire and its decline has been largely shaped by his viewpoints (Beard 2015), along with a limited number of other sources including Cassius Dio, Suetonius, Josephus, some surviving works on the emperors by Plutarch, plus a diffuse array of architectural, archaeological and inscriptional evidence. However, Tacitus wrote in an age when the Empire as a political system led by one man (the Principate) had been established for more than a hundred years, a context which strongly coloured Tacitus's writings. It took decades for many of the problems implicit in the imperial system to become clear to contemporaries, leading to a major debate on the nature of power and succession that would continue for centuries. Here it is important not to uncritically accept a moral decline thesis for all emperors, nor assume we can simply divide emperors into the good and the bad (Beard 2015). Moreover, a more important issue might be how

well the imperial system, created by Augustus by adapting, controlling, and coopting republican institutions, survived under different leaders for some two-hundred years (Syme 1974; Beard 2015 & 2023; Holland 2023). Tacitus provides a range of detail that can help us explore some of these issues.

The following table of dates might be helpful in setting some of the context for the following discussion of Tacitus as a historian, political analyst and ironist.

**Table 1: Imperial Dynasties from Augustus to Hadrian**  
(adapted from the Michael Grant edition of Tacitus's *Annals*).

JULIO-CLAUDIAN DYNASTY

27 B.C. - A.D. 14	Augustus
A.D. 14-37	Tiberius
37-41	Gaius (Caligula)
41-54	Claudius
54-68	Nero

CIVIL WAR & INTERIM RULERS

68-69	Galba
69-69	Otho
69-69	Vitellus

FLAVIAN DYNASTY

69-79	Vespasian
79-81	Titus
81-96	Domitian

'ADOPTIVE' EMPERORS

[The term adoptive here refers to the fact that both Nerva and Trajan, in theory, adopted the 'best man' to rule after them. Similar strategies had been attempted on other occasions, but the successor had been usually sought from within the imperial family, leading to limited options, especially during the earlier Julio-Claudian period.]

96-98	Nerva
98-117	Trajan
117-138	Hadrian

## 2. Tacitus the Man

The performance of Tacitus the historian can be debated at several levels. His *Annals* of the early Principate, for example, can be viewed as a history founded on gossip and innuendo, a sly attack on the characters of these emperors, prompted by Tacitus's own experiences under later, harsh rulers (see further below). Such a view is far from a complete account of the value of Tacitus's analysis. Two major objections can be made to such an interpretation. Firstly, the nature of power in this

period, now mainly concentrated on the person of the Princeps, meant that the character of the ruler and that of the key persons around him in fact become crucial mediators of action in the Roman state. Secondly, there were very real parallels between the problems experienced by Tacitus under later rulers such as Domitian and Nerva, and the problems experienced by senators under the Julio-Claudian Dynasty (Augustus through to Nero). Although some of the insights developed in Tacitus's experience of the later Principate do lead to some unfortunate shifts of emphasis, the picture he paints does have strong points of agreement with other sources known to us (especially Cassius Dio, Suetonius and Pliny the Younger). To explore these themes further we will need to look forward a little in time to the life and times of Publius Cornelius Tacitus.

After the suicide of Nero in 68 CE (Suetonius *Nero* 49), major civil wars ensued through 68-69 BCE, with five major imperators (generals backed by their armies and claiming imperial status and powers, including Vindex and Clodius Macer) contented for power. At last, after widespread, bloody conflict, a new dynasty was established under Vespasian, who had commanded large legionary forces in the east. The elderly Vespasian was followed by his son Titus, then by the rather more malevolent second son, Domitian. The reign of Domitian, a competent but harsh administrator, ended in his assassination by his servants and slaves, perhaps encouraged by court officials and his wife Domitia (Suetonius *Domitian* 13-18). A more moderate man was chosen to rule after him, the elderly Nerva. However, the Praetorian guard, led by Casperius Aelianus, had been treated well by Domitian and now demanded that vengeance be taken against the assassins, with which Nerva was forced to comply (Syme 1967). At this stage Nerva must have realized that singular control of Rome was almost beyond him. In conjunction with the imperial council, he accepted the appointment of an heir and colleague in power, Marcus Ulpius Traianus (known to us as Trajan), who had command of the armies in Upper Germany, and therefore represented a real military power (Syme 1967). This step stabilized the Roman state, avoided another civil war, and in due course ushered in a period of stability under Trajan and his successor Hadrian.



*A Bronze Sestertius issued under the Emperor Trajan<sup>1</sup>*

---

<sup>1</sup> Showing Trajan on horseback defeating a Dacian warrior, after conquests north of the Danube River.

It was during this cycle of emperors that Tacitus lived, being born circa 56 or 57 CE somewhere in Narbonensis, southern France, grew up, took a prominent public career leading to the consulship, and moved from the practise of oratory towards the craft of history (Syme 1970). Tacitus tells us very little about himself in his writings, but we are lucky to have a more forthcoming source in his friend and colleague, Pliny the Younger, whose letters provide evidence for the period. It seems likely that Tacitus's family were originally of equites status, but a relative (probably a father or uncle) in the previous generation had achieved the status of procurator of Belgium, allowing Tacitus to be granted the thick (rather than thin) purple strip on his toga as a young man (Syme 1967), indicating that he was singled out for a senatorial career, a common procedure by this time (Talbert 1984, p12-14). Tacitus at first held one of the 20 minor offices, and during this time also studied oratory. From here Tacitus went on to be a military tribune, probably in 76 CE, perhaps serving under a relative or family friend in a legionary force. After his return he was betrothed and married the daughter of Julius Agricola in 77 CE (Syme 1970; Syme 1967; Talbert 1984). It is also possible, but not certain, that Tacitus at some stage was appointed as curator of the Emperor's library, though this evidence is based on Guglielmo da Pastrengo, a 14<sup>th</sup> century source, and the senatorial class did not normally take up librarian posts (Reed 1976).

By 81/2 CE Tacitus achieved the office of quaestor, though we are not sure whether this involved him being posted to the Senatorial provinces, or remaining in Rome (Syme 1967). In 88 CE Tacitus became praetor (*Annals* XI.11), while by this time he also held a position in one of the higher-ranking religious colleges (Syme 1967). Tacitus's career proceeded well under the emperor Domitian, in spite of the ruin of his father-in-law Agricola, who was recalled from Britain in 84 CE, and died under mysterious circumstances in 93 CE. We are not certain of Tacitus's duties during and after his praetorship, but in 93 CE he was away from Rome, perhaps in command of a legion as a legate (Syme 1967, p68). Tacitus held the consulship in 97 CE and thus reached the top tier of senatorial, as distinct from imperial, government. His consulship was probably nominated in advance by Domitian, though actually held under the reign of Nerva (Syme 1967). In any case, he may have been consul during the fateful period of the choice of a new emperor, and the difficulties in establishing his power against the vested interests of various parties, including the Praetorian Guard, which had become increasingly important since the time of Tiberius (Holland 2023). At this stage, of course, the consulship did not imply any real initiative in the use of power. However, it is possible that he was involved in the imperial council which decided that Nerva needed a successor and colleague in power (Syme 1967). The theme of succession, of course, is crucial in the *Histories*, and virtually forms the opening scene with the problematic succession of Tiberius to Augustus in the *Annals*. Tacitus had a more positive view of the 'new era' under Nerva and Trajan, though this may entail some degree of subtle flattery rather than the experience of genuine freedom (Griffin 1999, p152, following Tacitus *Agricola* 3.44, Tacitus *Histories* I.1 & Tacitus *Annals* I.8).

During his consulship Tacitus gave a funeral oration (Pliny *Epistle* II.1.6) - little else is known for the year. His first known action as a consul was to act as an advocate, along with Pliny, for the successful prosecution (100 CE) of Marius Priscus, who had been the proconsul of North Africa in

---

OPTIMO PRINCIPI indicates he was the best of Princes, i.e. the best of emperors. (Public Domain, courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/248058>)

97 CE and had apparently been rapacious and extortionate in that province. Here we can see the rhetorical skills of both men being used effectively before the Senate, though there seems to have been some sympathy towards the accused (Syme 1967). As can be inferred from the letters of Pliny, who wrote to Tacitus several times (*Letters* 4, 14, 65, 66, 85), between 101 and 105 CE Tacitus seems to have spent some time away from Rome, perhaps as a provincial governor or army commander (Birley 2000; Syme 1967; for the friendship and rivalry of Tacitus and Pliny, see Griffin 1999). An inscription from Mylasa in Anatolia (*OGIS* 487) indicates that Tacitus was the proconsul from 112-113 CE for the province of Asia (Birley 2000; Syme 1967).

Little more is concretely known about Tacitus. However, a great deal can be inferred from the society in which he and Pliny must have moved; including the provincial equites class (knights) from which Tacitus's family derived, the Narbonese friends and clients from Agricola's family, the prestigious members of his religious college, and orators and masters of jurisprudence, which may have included as elder members orators such as Marcus Aper, Vibius Crispus and Eprius Marcellus (the last two may have been skilful orators but also acted as *delatores*, or informers and prosecutors), and perhaps a connection with the teacher and rhetorician, Quintilian (Syme 1967; Brodey & Van Den Berg 2023).

### 3. Early Monographs

Two early monographs by Tacitus appeared circa 98 CE; the *Agricola* and then the *Germanica*. Tacitus's first work (the *Agricola*) can be viewed as a political biography tinged with rhetoric devices. This is a panegyric monograph celebrating the life and successes of his father-in-law, Agricola, who had major military victories in Britain but who soon fell foul of imperial politics under Domitian. The work is strongly influenced by the rhetorical demands of a such a tract, inspired by family loyalty: -

In the *Agricola* Tacitus musters all the resources of an advocate's art, mature in its command of innuendo, to demonstrate how an evil emperor visited upon the conqueror of Britain his envy, hatred, and his fears. (Syme 1967, p67)

The conflict between a prominent senator and a jealous 'monarch', afraid that he might lose his own power, is shown in full, with even the imputation that Agricola had been poisoned (Syme 1967, pp122-3). The work shows an aggrandizement of Agricola that may be suitable in a funeral oration: Agricola is said to have conquered the entire island (which he did not), while the withdrawal of legions from him may have been due to real needs on the German frontier (Syme 1967). The sinister view of Domitian probably influenced Tacitus's later accounts of both Tiberius and Claudius. Domitian was an unpopular ruler who eventually took up the titles *dominus et deus* ('lord and god') in both writing and conversation, and made himself widely hated and feared, leading to his assassination (Suetonius Domitian 13-14; Lightfoot 2015). Tacitus's negative view of Domitian is generally supported in several letters of Pliny the Younger, as summarized by Miriam Griffin:

... he too speaks of the Emperor's cruelty and anger (Ep. 4.11), of his humiliation of the senate (8.14), of the resentment men felt at having effectively lost a period out of their lives (8.14.9-10). Moreover, in Ep. 1.12.8 Corellius Rufus, who finally committed suicide under Nerva because of the intolerable

pain of his illness, earns Pliny's admiration for saying that he had hung on to life in order to survive *iste latro* [this thief] (Domitian) by just one day. (1999, p146, square brackets added)

The *Agricola* also indirectly attacked those unnamed persons who would oppose the rule of the emperor in such a way as to lead to their own deaths but do not really help the 'Commonwealth' (Tacitus *Agricola* 42). Here, Tacitus is perhaps defending his own quietism (Syme 1970). The need, perhaps, was to chart a path between a subservient flattery and too much independence. However, the *Agricola* is more than this. It is also something of a 'manifesto for the Emperor Trajan and the new imperial aristocracy' (Syme 1967, p125). Here, Tacitus is in accord with Pliny (Pliny *Panegyric*, 94.5) on the new regime. If Nerva had gone a large way towards reconciling the principate with *libertas* (political freedom to pursue office), Trajan had gone further in providing it with the resilience to avoid excess paranoia and suspicion.



Portrait bust of Emperor Domitian, ca. 90 CE.<sup>2</sup>

Tacitus's *Germanica* is also another interesting exercise in a field often associated with ancient history, that is, ethnography. As early as Hecataeus and Herodotus, the study of other races and peoples had been fundamental tasks for historians studying the conflict between their own and other cultures. As a moral text, the *Germanica* is fascinating, showing what Tacitus thought the Romans had lost their own early vigour and morality. As a factual study, however, it is rather limited, projecting a great deal onto the tribes north of the Rhine, and much of its information was obsolete even by Tacitus's own day: it seems to have relied largely on the researches of Pliny the Elder (on this 'idealization of the savage' see Syme 1967, pp126-8). However, it remains an important work demonstrating efforts at cultural definition, but is more informative about the significance of the Germans to the Romans, rather than a fully accurate historical source on the German tribes of this

---

<sup>2</sup> Ancient Rome, Parian marble; The Toledo Museum of Art, Toledo, Ohio. (Image courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum, <https://www.metmuseum.org/articles/toledo-museum-loan-exchange>)

period. In effect, an idealized view of the German tribes was held up as a means to criticize Roman decline. For Tacitus, the Germans were willing to fight for their freedom while the Roman senate was enslaved under the Principate (Baroud 2023: Tacitus *Annals* III.65).

One of the most interesting works of Tacitus is his masterful dialogue on rhetoric, the *Dialogus*, probably completed by 102 CE, and set in the historical time-frame of the previous century. We do know that Quintilian taught Pliny the Younger, and there are some echoes from Quintilian's *Institutio Oratoria* which can be detected in the *Dialogus* (Syme 1967), though it seems that Tacitus did not have quite as high an opinion of Cicero as an orator as did Quintilian (Tacitus *Dialogus* 40.2; Syme 1967). This text has to be read closely, like all dialogues, in which the different characters are allowed to draw out the complexity of an issue by taking diverse viewpoints. One of the main speakers is Marcus Aper, a 'new man' from Gaul who rose through the ranks to become praetor and ended up being a famous advocate who defended members of the imperial circle, perhaps before the emperor himself. Aper may have been one of the main inspirations for the young Tacitus (Brodey & Van Den Berg 2023). However, Tacitus allowed himself certain clever ironies: as one of the masters of rhetoric Aper, chooses two speakers for the glories of oratory under the Principate, a certain Epirus Marcellus and Vibius Crispus. Both were notorious *delatores*, professional informers and prosecutors under the emperors Nero and Domitian (Costa 1969). Rhetoric may have gained skilful speakers and extra polish under the emperors, but its purposes were now often corrupted. The irony would not have been lost on Tacitus's audience.

The theme of literary corruption and social decadence was a common debating point, raised, for example, in Quintilian's *De Causis Corruptae Eloquentiae* (Costa 1969, p28) and found expression in the satires of Petronius and Juvenal, but Tacitus differed in both his diagnosis and prognosis of this disease. While Quintilian proclaims a rebirth in this field, the *Dialogus* shows why such a rebirth can at best be only superficial (Syme 1967). Ironically, after a disputation on the styles and benefits of oratory, Tacitus shows that the decline of this art is based on the political and social changes attendant on the Principate. Eloquence, like other forms of independent contest, was tamed and disciplined by Augustus and could not, perhaps should not, recover (Tacitus *Dialogus* 38.2; Syme 1967). Indeed, such court room eloquent no longer seemed needed, since from the middle of the reign of Augustus 'when in consequence of the long period of peace, and the unbroken spell of inactivity on the part of the commons and of peaceableness on the part of the senate, by reason also of the working of the great imperial system, a hush had fallen on eloquence, as indeed it had on the world at large.' (Tacitus *Dialogus* 38.2)

These opinions are expressed through the voice of Maternus (Tacitus *Dialogus* 36-41), a respected and senior man, though we should be careful in assuming that he is the persona of Tacitus since some of the opinions voiced do not seem fully in accord with Tacitus's wider interests (Luce 1986, p145-6). Aper does seem to represent some of Tacitus's stylistic views (Costa 1969, p31), but not his main critique of empire. The basic doctrines of rhetorical decline are compatible with the structures of corruption presented in Tacitus's *Histories* and *Annals*, and is an enduring theme in his work. The central issues concern the difficulty of reconciling the principate with *libertas*, involving an amalgam of positive and negative freedoms: freedom of speech, freedom to hold office and to conduct affairs

as a Roman citizen, free of servility and fear. Furthermore, unless good men rule, the principate will decline into a dominate, where one man, no matter how capable, rules others like slaves.

It should not surprise us, therefore, that after such a conclusion Tacitus's own intellectual interests would turn elsewhere, specifically towards history. Rhetoric was a useful art for prosecution and legal defence within the imperial system, but it had been increasingly limited to the central need to protect the regime. A mere remnant remained for protecting the dignity of others, but more often it was distorted by the informers and delatores who prosecuted those seen to threaten the emperor and the imperial system.

#### **4. A Brief Assessment of the *Histories***

Tacitus's first major historical study (known to us as the *Histories*) was well under way by 105 CE. It was a thorough investigation of the period from 69 CE through the end of the civil wars in which Vespasian's forces were victorious, initiating a new imperial dynasty. Only four books, and part of a fifth, have survived. A summary of these books has been provided by Ronald Syme: -

Book I narrates the assassination of Galba, Otho's seizure of power, and the march of the two armies of Vitellus from the Rhine to northern Italy. The second contains the campaign of Bedriacum, the end of Otho, and the proclamation of Vespasian in the East. The third, opening with the invasion of Italy by the Flavian generals [supporters of Vespasian], describes the Battle of Cremona, the march on Rome, the abdication and death of Vitellus in December of the year 69. With the fourth, the events on the Rhine in the rebellion of Julius Civilis are fully treated. The fragment of Book V (twenty-six chapters) furnishes the prelude to the siege of Jerusalem by Titus, and goes on to wind up the affair of Civilis. (Syme 1967, p118, brackets added)

The termination point proposed for the entire work is not known: it may have gone forward past the death of Vespasian in 79 CE to discuss the reign of Domitian (Syme 1967, pp119-120). The history discussed in this work provides an interesting test case for an assessment of Tacitus's accuracy and methodology. The work can be shown to be influenced by a tradition which goes back beyond Livy and Lucan to a style more consonant with that of Sallust and Thucydides (Syme 1967, pp134-143; Keitel 1984), including the pointed, ironic style which peels away the layers of action to arrive at a broader conception of motivation, both psychological and social. Both Sallust and Tacitus were as much propagators of a political position as writers of history. The *Histories* deals with events that occurred during Tacitus's youth, and a period from which he might have interviewed many survivors. Furthermore, there were some intriguing parallels between 68-9 CE and later times. Galba, for example, had attempted to adopt a ranking noble as heir to bolster his reign and failed, whereas the adoptive processes of Nerva and Trajan would be quite successful (Syme 1967, p130). The contrast between the two reigns, with their differences and similarities (Luce 1986), is played upon in an ironic speech in which Galba adopts the young noble Piso (Tacitus *Histories* I.15-16). Overall, the succession problem remained one of the most fraught issues for imperial governance, and in all cases a delegate would need support from the Praetorian guard, and acceptance, or at least no major opposition, from legionary forces on the frontiers (Beard 2015). However, such schematism does not destroy the overall validity of the *Histories*, which seems well-based on available evidence. We might further ask, as an example of nearly 'contemporary history', how well does Tacitus use evidence from both sides of the conflict, from the forces of Vespasian and his major opponent, Vitellus?



The first thing to note is that although Tacitus is critical of the main defeated general, Vitellus, who had commanded the Rhine legions (*Histories* II.59, 62, 71 & 73), he nonetheless does not emerge as a strong partisan of the successful man who became emperor. He is critical of Vespasian at times, e.g. his bad rule of Africa (Tacitus *Histories* II.96), and his willingness to strip rich men of their wealth to obtain finances (Tacitus *Histories* II.84). In the end, however, Vespasian is viewed as the better man because Vitellus would be too weak for the good governance of the State (*Histories* III.86). Tacitus's tacit support of Vespasian seems to be based on his ability to retain the support of prominent men such as Gaius Licinius Mucianus, and to ensure the continued support of the legions.



Gold Aureus of Vespasian, issued 70 CE<sup>3</sup>

Interestingly too, the real villains of the *Histories* are not figures such as Otho or Vitellus, but the moral condition of the soldiers and the populace of Rome itself. Tacitus states that 'in civil wars the soldiers have more license than the generals' (*Histories* II.29), while he describes the way the populace reacted when Rome was invaded in 69 CE in the following terms: -

As if it were a new delight added to their holidays, they exulted in and enjoyed the scene, indifferent to parties, and rejoicing over the sufferings of the Commonwealth. (Tacitus *Histories* III.83)

Generally, Ronald Martin seems correct in viewing Tacitus's account as relatively free from a pro-Flavian bias and attempting to analyse events on an individual basis (Martin 1981). Tacitus's main themes include a hatred of civil war, which is viewed as both mad and criminal (*Histories* II.38 & III.25), and the loss of liberty under imperial rule, in part driven by the role of informers in creating a widespread culture of fear and sycophancy, and by the lack of initiative by the Senate (Tacitus

---

<sup>3</sup> Image of Peace (Pax), seated, with olive branch and winged caduceus, indicating prudence and diligence. The abbreviation COS ITER TR POT stands for *Consul Iterum, Tribunicia Potestate*, 'Consul for the second time, holder of tribunician power'. The coin commemorates the end of the Civil Wars of 68-69 CE. (Public Domain image courtesy of Metropolitan Museum, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/246876>)

*Histories* IV.44; Tacitus *Annals* III.65)). Indeed, in another context Tacitus notes that ‘liberty’ is often used as a pretext for conquest whereby men seek to enslave others and secure dominion (Tacitus *Histories* IV.73).

Most of Tacitus’s written sources for this period have been lost to us. From his own account he was aware of the writings of Vipstanus Messalla and Pliny the Elder, as well as other unnamed sources (Tacitus *Histories* III.22, 25, 28, 29, & 51). Although it is not certain that these sources are those later on used by Plutarch and Suetonius (Martin 1981, pp190-6), it must be remembered that the events of 69 CE were still very much in living memory. If the work was completed by 107 CE, (Martin 1981), then there would have been some elders alive who fought as young men in these wars. On at least two occasions Tacitus may be referring to eye-witness accounts, one of which was the defence of the town of Placentia by Titus Vestricius Spurinna, who lived past 98 CE and may have recounted this narrative himself (*Histories* III.38; Martin 1981). In any case, the wealth of details provided by Tacitus of the wars of 69 CE probably derive from survivors of both the opposing camps of Vitellus and Vespasian and their generals. If so, Tacitus’s work remains a significant primary source which should not be underestimated. He also emerges as a competent military historian, contra the views of Mommsen and Wellesley (Reed 1976).

Why had Tacitus turned to history? As stated in the *Agricola* (Tacitus *Agricola* III.2 & II.3; Syme 1967), the main reason seems to have been the fifteen years of repression under Domitian during which overt opposition or criticism was unwise if one wanted to survive. If unable to assert a true independence under benevolent emperors such as Nerva and Trajan, Tacitus could at least condemn the outrages committed in earlier times, and demonstrate the real problems with the concentration of power in the hands of a single ruler. Not only the ruler, but the ruled, in such a system, become corrupted. As noted by Syme, Tacitus’s own experiences added ‘substance, insight and intensity’ to his account of the period following 69 CE (Syme 1967, p131). Furthermore, the scope, scale and literary techniques used by Tacitus, especially in its exposition of the suffering of civil war, suggests that in many ways he was referencing and using elements of the Epic poetic tradition, especially as found in Virgil and Lucan, using both negative and positive examples (Joseph 2012).

Although these factors may have weighed the composition in a certain direction, it was also based on the fact that there were real similarities between the two periods, giving a sharp contemporary significance to the *Histories* which would have been obvious to contemporaries (Syme 1967). Such hindsight, however, is a recurring problem. Modern accounts of the Roman Revolution, for example, are written by those who know that Napoleon hijacked the French Revolution, Mussolini marched on Rome to create a fascist state, that Hitler as an elected German official overthrew the German constitution which had allowed him to be appointed Chancellor, and that President Putin uses his elected position as the basis for authoritarian rule. Such examples, rather than Garibaldi and Bismark, are likely to make us look more critically at the ‘great men’ of the past and ‘great man’ versions of historiography (Beard 2015; Syme 1974).

## **5. The *Annals* as History and Ironic Biography**

The *Histories* provided an interesting workshop for the growth of Tacitus's skills as a historian, but they were perfected in the rather more difficult task of describing the earlier period of the Principate from Tiberius to Nero. Here several major themes emerge early in the *Annals*. The first is the Principate as something new, neither a kingdom nor a dictatorship (Tacitus *Annals* I.9), in which the powers of the Senate, the magistrates and the law are effectively combined in one person (Tacitus *Annals* I.2; Beard 2015). Likewise, the succession issue is taken up very soon in the narrative, with a discussion of the way that Tiberius is forced to adopt Germanicus in order that Augustus might have several safeguards for the continuity of the new order (Tacitus *Annals* I.3).

It is in the first two books that we see a discussion of a number of alternatives to the Caesars as the *principes* (leading men) in the state; Asinius Gallus, Lucius Arruntius, Quintus Haterius, Mamercus Aemilius Scaurus, Cn. Calpurnius Piso and M. Aemilius Lepidus are prominent men known to Augustus as having special potential (Tacitus *Annals* I.12-13). Later on, we find other prominent men suffering under Tiberius, including Scribonius Libo Drusus, grandson of Pompey (Tacitus *Annals* II.27-32), the impoverished Marcus Hortensius Hortalus (Tacitus *Annals* II.27-32), and the over-ambitious Clemens who had wished to use the influence of Postumus Agrippa with the legions in Germany (Tacitus *Annals* II.39-40). The general point is that the nobility, especially those whose ancestors had held the consulship before the time of Augustus, came into more and more danger as it was from this class alone that real rivals for power would be found. Hence it can be argued that there were many leading men at Rome at any one time, that is, *principes viri* (Tacitus *Annals* III.6). It was this class which Augustus needed to both control and persuade to re-establish the Roman state. However, in the end, there was only one *princeps senatus* with *imperium*, acting under his own auspices. Losing the friendship of such a man would at the least result in the termination of any public career, e.g. as in the case of Decimus Silanus under Tiberius (Tacitus *Annals* III.24). The general point, as noted by writers such as R. P. Saller (1982), was that patronage was increasingly concentrated on the *princeps* and the circle around him. Even though there were other patrons active for poets and writers during the age of Augustus, it became increasingly dangerous to verbally attack emperors, or to support opposing leaders and viewpoints. The *amici* (political friends) of the *princeps* could act as brokers of this patronage, with even an *eques* (knight) such as Sejanus, the minister of Tiberius, developing enormous power. Indirect patronage, too, began to be felt in the courts, where prosecutions were either forcefully pursued, or abandoned, on the basis of the interpretation of the wishes of the *princeps*, e.g. the prosecution of C. Silanus where hardly no one could be found to defend the man (Tacitus *Annals* III.66-69). Other leading men still had influence, but it was confined, both by the facts of military power, and by voluntary choice to avoid conflicts with prestige of the imperial administration which now concentrated power more on the palace rather than the Senate.

Furthermore, although Augustus and Tiberius were at first friendly to this group of nobles, what brought this group 'into danger was the widespread opinion that it alone had the right to supply the *princeps*' (Gelzer 1969, p155). Later on, it was thanks to the fear of specific nobles as potential threats to the Emperor Nero that men such as M. Iunius Silanus and Rubellius Plautus would die (Gelzer 1969, pp155-6). Even the milder Claudius still had up to thirty-five senators and three equites hundred killed during his reign (Suetonius *Claudius* 29). This led to the black humour of Seneca's comic work written to amuse the following ruler Nero, where the divine Augustus protests against

Claudius that: “This man, gentleman, who seems incapable of shooing a fly, killed men as easily as you get a low roll of the dice” (Seneca *Apocolocyntosis* 10; see further Beard 2015).

The *Annals* is something more than a standard chronological history. In choosing writing to write an annal, Tacitus is superficially using the structure of earlier writers such as Livy. More than this however, the work contains several carefully structured biographical accounts of the emperors, as well as briefer characterizations of personages such as Livia, Sejanus and Germanicus. There seems to be a sharp decline in most of the emperors described, especially in the cases of Tiberius, Nero and Claudius (though the account of Claudius is not complete, I would disagree with Luce 1986, p152, that Claudius seems static in the sections we do have). The ‘psychological drama’ is expressed most clearly in the closing years of Tiberius, which has been presented by Tacitus, with some ‘rhetorical exaggeration’, as a virtual reign of terror (Keitel 1984, p310). Tacitus notes that Tiberius had largely retreated from contact with Rome and the Senate, and Tacitus recounts the following in book VI, describing affairs in 32 CE when Tiberius writes to the Senate: -

The opening of Tiberius' letter attracted attention. 'If I know what to write to you at this time, senators,' he said, 'or how to write it, or what not to write, may heaven plunge me into a worse ruin than I feel overtaking me every day!' His crimes and wickedness had rebounded to torment himself. How truly the wisest of men used to assert that the souls of despots, if revealed, would show wounds and mutilations - weals left on the spirit, like lash-marks on a body, by cruelty, lust, and malevolence. Neither Tiberius' autocracy nor insolation could save him from confessing the internal torments which were his retribution. (Tacitus *Annals* VI.4-8, translated by Michael Grant)

This ‘cry from the heart of Tiberius’ (Levick 1978, pp98-100) may have been based partly on contempt for the group who had failed him in his attempt to rule more fairly, as well as shock at the range of men who had been implicated in the fall of Sejanus. However, a literary topos, that of the tragic decline of men subjected to the abuse of power, may also have shaped this account. This was a standard form in ancient biography and tragedy. It is most clearly seen in the almost contemporary account of Herod the Great provided by Josephus and in the biography of King Agis of Sparta by Plutarch. The dictum seems to be not so much that absolute power corrupts absolutely (Lord Acton’s axiom), but that power corrupts progressively. Tacitus’s account of Tiberius may be over-schematic, but the corruption and ambition of a trusted minister such as Sejanus would have been sufficient to shake the most confident of rulers.

One of the main classical debates was whether a person’s character could really change, or was merely revealed. Tacitus presents Tiberius as merely becoming more confident in revealing his real character, in expressing desires long concealed (Luce 1986; Schulz 2019). This seems difficult to reconcile with Tacitus’s ‘obituary’ for the man: -

His character, too, had its different stages. While he was a private citizen or holding commands under Augustus, his life was blameless; and so was his reputation. While Germanicus and Drusus still lived, he concealed his true self, cunningly affecting virtuous qualities. However, until his mother died there was good in Tiberius as well as evil. Again, as long as he favoured (or feared) Sejanus, the cruelty of Tiberius was detested, but his perversions unrevealed. Then fear vanished, and with it shame. Thereafter he expressed only his own personality by unrestrained crime and infamy. (*Annals* VI.51, translated by Michael Grant)

The underlying character, or *ingenium*, is held in check by the need, fear or desire of others. These apparent changes, of course, are really changes of behaviour in response to varying circumstances, a subject most suitable for a historian (Luce 1986). Furthermore, they chart a course marked by a growing sense of Tiberius's own power, along with a heightened sense of fear and distaste at the men who might be his enemies: the nobles and consulars in the Senate.



*Portrait of the Emperor Tiberius, circa 14-37 CE., engraved on a gold ring with carnelian intaglio portrait.<sup>4</sup>*

Tiberius's decline, then, regardless of formal embellishments in certain areas, is represented as marked by an escalation of autocracy once he realises that his position is not entirely secure in Rome. Likewise, the growing abuse of the Senate by Caligula, Claudius and Nero is not in itself improbable, and rightly forms a central theme for Tacitus (Syme 1970). However, Tacitus uses sophisticated literary means to deconstruct or make ambiguous even positive programs or acts of many of the emperors (Schulz 2019). For Nero and Domitian:

Tacitus offers an excellent starting point for the study of historiographical strategies used against Nero and Domitian and of the deconstruction of forms of their imperial representation, by which I mean those topics through which the emperor, his entourage, or others construct an image of him, such as military actions, building programmes, and divinity. Tacitus takes up all the historical and panegyric topics of imperial representation and deconstructs them, i.e. re-shapes them to negative effect, in different ways, adapting his strategies to the existing discourses about each emperor . . . . In Nero's case, the emperor as military leader is deconstructed as an inactive princeps absent from war and as not fulfilling his role; in Domitian's case, the emperor is deconstructed as a hypocrite faking military triumphs and only pretending to fulfil his role. (Schulz 2019, p164)

The emperors faced a major contradiction; they needed to control prominent Senators, but found their abject abasement frustrating, as well as useless for the purposes of creating an effective

---

<sup>4</sup> Such rings were often used as seals on hot wax for documents or goods, or kept as heirlooms, but during the early empire only senators, magistrates and equites were allowed to wear gold rings, unless special permission was granted by the emperor, e.g. to freedmen who often served in the palace administration (Schmitz 1875). Public Domain image courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/256197>

administrative class for the empire. However, the Senate still legitimated ‘the position and measures’ of the emperors, who were in general eager for its approval (Talbert 1984, p136). Tacitus himself had needed to be a shrewd judge of character to survive in the reigns of Domitian, Nerva and Trajan. If his view of Tiberius is corrupted by the shadow of Domitian, it was only a matter of a few tones of added depth and darkness.

It is with these factors in mind that we can assess Tacitus’s statement in Book IV concerning his motives in writing such an account, and its attendant dangers: -

Similarly, now that Rome has virtually been transformed into an autocracy, the investigation and record of these details concerning the autocrat may prove useful. Indeed, it is from such studies - from the experience of others - that most men learn to distinguish right and wrong, advantage and disadvantage. Few can tell them apart instinctively.

So these accounts have their uses. But they are distasteful. What interests and stimulates readers is a geographical description, the changing fortune of a battle, the glorious death of a commander. My themes on the other hand concern cruel orders, unremitting accusations, treacherous friendships, innocent men ruined – a conspicuously monotonous glut of downfalls and their monstrous causes. Besides, whereas the ancient historian has few critics – nobody minds if he overpraises the Carthaginian (or the Roman) army – the men punished or disgraced under Tiberius have numerous descendants living today. And even when the families are extinct, some will think, if their own habits are similar, that the mention of another’s crimes is directed against them. Even glory and merit make enemies – by showing their opposites in too sharp a relief.

(*Annals* IV.33, translated by Michael Grant)

These historical accounts then, were read with dual vision, exploring the past and making imputations about Tacitus’s own time. One key lesson to be explored was how the principate came to be based not on an earned *auctoritas* (political and social authority leading to high levels of prestige) and legal *imperium*, but on a domination in which there is no place for the *libertas* of even the highest of other officials in the state. *Potentia*, too, is a term which comes to infer illicit power and influence, unchecked by law or the regulation of the state (Benario 1964). The specific use of these terminologies shows that one of the central themes of the *Annals* is ‘the corruption of state, of people, of morals under a government dominated, not ruled, by one man’ (Benario 1964, p103). It is under such conditions, of course, that the character of the man who rules becomes crucial. This is probably why Tacitus began his study in depth with Tiberius: the mature Augustus did not reveal the required characteristics of decline needed for his purposes, while the dynasty itself could not be seen as a true autocracy until succession demonstrated that the free workings of the *Res Publica* of the People and Senate of Rome was truly over (contra Syme 1970, pp127-8). At the same time, it is likely that he was hostile both to the type of regime and perhaps even to the nature of the ‘peace’ that Augustus had established (Keitel 1984). As argued by Elizabeth Keitel: -

In summary, Tacitus conceives of both civil war and lawless persecutions and violence by the princeps as war against the state, comparable to the actions of a foreign foe in wartime. (Keitel 1984, p310)

Tacitus is also critical of the type of mass appeal an emperor might mobilise through the provisions of games, festivals, and the limited but important urban grain dole, drawn from Egyptian and African imports (Beard 2015; Holland 2023). In his portrayal of Nero this is interpreted as part of a corrupt relationship:

In Tacitus, the emperor's *civilitas* is often depicted as confined to his attention to and appreciation by the people. Nero's entertaining the masses is closely connected to the idea of *euergetism*, which expected the princeps to provide benefits for his people. The historical Nero presented himself as a supporter of the *populus*, and he was indeed popular with the people. His organization of entertainment and his representation as artist are strongly connected to his close relationship with the people. The critical discourse reacts to this kind of imperial representation, which was aimed specifically at the people, in a similarly specific way. It does not deny this good relationship. The strategy used to deconstruct Nero's popularity is rather to show that this good relationship between emperor and plebs was a relationship among equally bad people. Descriptions of the people are mostly negative: the public is described as ever ready to believe the worst (*ut est vulgus ad deteriora promptum*, *Ann.* 15.64.2) and as judging emperors by their outward appearance. The feature that the Tacitean Roman people share most prominently with their emperor is their desire for entertainment. This shared interest makes them sad about Nero's death (*plebs sordida et circo ac theatris sueta ... maesti et rumorum avidi*, *Hist.* 1.4.3). The plebs is characterized by its eagerness for entertainment (*voluptatum cupido*, *Ann.* 15.36.4), and is happy about a princeps who feels the same (*ut est vulgus cupiens voluptatum et, si eodem princepstrahat, laetum*, *Ann.* 14.14.2). But this happiness is not innocent or blameless. (Schulz 2019, pp70-71)

We can see, then, that the *Annals* was intended to provide an insight not just about the Julio-Claudians, but about the principate as a whole and the emerging imperial system, therefore reflecting on the realities of power relations in later periods. In many ways, it was the nature of the empire itself as Rome became militarily dominant across the Mediterranean that created the emperors, not vice versa, with the older Republican system of regular power sharing among many short-term office holders no longer able to be sustained (Beard 2015 & 2023). In this, the work was, and remains, a cautionary tale.

## 6. The Unique Perspective of Tacitus

It may seem that the actual opinions of the person Tacitus are very hard to discover. The influence of rhetoric allowed him to argue on more than one side of an issue, the desire to create a delightful literary work promoted the use of ambiguity and irony, doubts are expressed about certain opinions in his own writing, the limitations and discrepancies in his own sources: all these factors make it difficult to know what weight to give to statements in his own person (Goodyear, noted in Luce 1986, pp143-4). His style is often complex and elusive, with subtle and shifting ironies which avoid simplistic judgements. It is certainly true that he should not be regarded as an outright 'Republican', one who looked back with nostalgia to the days before the principate. Tacitus himself recognized that the history of the Republic had been horrendous (Benario 1964). Tacitus argues in the *Annals* that the last equitable legislation had been the drawing up of the Twelve Tables in the fifth century BCE (Keitel 1984). 'For subsequent laws, other than those directed against specific current offences, were forcible creations of class-warfare, designed to grant unconstitutional powers, or banish leading citizens, or fulfil some other deplorable purpose.' (Tacitus *Annals* III.28) Such allegiance to the past as existed was moral and social, not political (Syme 1970). Limited and failed attempts to actually restore some kind of Republic by the initiative of the Senate, e.g. at the death of Caligula and after the death of Nero, would be interesting lessons in themselves as to the real nature of power in the imperial Roman state (Beard 2015).

Nor can Tacitus be regarded as a strict rationalist in our sense. He used Roman religious and ethical concepts in two ways: firstly, to heighten the dramatic tension of an incident, and secondly as a real causal factor (Scott 1968). Notions of *fortuna* and *genius* (indicating a guardian spirit of a family ensuring its continuity over generations) are used in relation to key phases of Roman history, and to the fate of individual rulers, e.g. the *fortuna Flaviania* which allowed Vespasian to set up the new dynasty after 69 CE, which found representation in many coin issues of 70-73 CE (Scott 1968, p23, p70; OCRE Database). In the start of Book II of the *Histories*, for example, we find the following: -

In a distant part of the world fortune was now preparing the origin and rise of a new dynasty, whose varied destinies brought happiness or misery to the state, prosperity or destruction on the princes of its line. (Tacitus *Histories* II.1, translated by A. Church & W. Brodribb)

The writing here is rather rhetorical, but the phrasing of the oracles and prodigies associated with Vespasian (Tacitus *Histories* II.1-4) does not suggest that Tacitus is merely being ironic or dramatic. Fortune was indeed, (at least in hindsight), with Vespasian. In general, Tacitus, like Sallust, was something of a prudent moralist, knowing the difficulties of achieving reform, and knowing how much it was needed. Furthermore, it is the horror of civil war itself and declining social morals that fill his narratives, e.g. the ‘impious disregard of right and wrong’ of a cavalryman who had slain his brother in the civil war and wanted to be rewarded for the act (Tacitus *Histories* III.51).

However, we should not simplify and rarify the craft and art of Tacitus too far. As noted by T.J. Luce, Tacitus the historian is very much concerned with ‘the particularity of each event’ rather than just ‘the universals that might be abstracted from it’ (Luce 1986, p150). All these factors form a complex texture of politics, history, motivational analysis, rhetoric and biography which provides enough ‘thick description’ to do justice to the subject (see Geertz 1975 for this terminology). A simple reduction of these complex works, a ‘boiling down’ of these texts to extract a set of straightforward opinions or ‘facts’ is misdirected. Although we cannot go so far as to regard his aim as a ‘dispassionate discovery and presentation of truth’ (Scott 1968, p46), it is not surprising that, as a member of the class whose right to rule had been eroded, Tacitus should bring ‘rancour and personal judgements’ (Usher 1969, p234), innuendo and narrative methods of deconstruction into his accounts (see Schulz 2019). In general, his spleen does not invalidate his insight into many issues, but does mean that we need to critically interpret the context of the information he provides.

The perspective of Tacitus is much more than a leavening of Roman historiography with the methods of rhetoric, irony and epic poetry. Tacitus reveals a complex political, moral and religious viewpoint that recognises both necessity and aspiration. He does a lot more than try to enlarge our sensibilities (as noted by Luce 1986). He also strived to leave behind him a detailed account of the problems associated with one-man rule in the early Roman Empire, including the often-unrestrained use of violence and power. In these aims he has succeeded.

## **7. Bibliography and Further Reading**

### ***Ancient***



CASSIUS DIO *The Roman History: The Reign of Augustus*, trans. Scott-Kilvert, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1987

JOSEPHUS *Jewish Antiquities*, trans. by Havercamp, N.Y., Biglow, 1924

JOSEPHUS *Jewish War*, trans. by Cornfeld, G., Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1982

JOSEPHUS *The Jewish War*, trans. By G.A. Williamson, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1981

PLINY *Letters and Panegyric*, trans. B. Radice, Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press, 1975

PLINY *Letters of Pliny*, trans. William Melmoth, ed/ by F. Bosawuent, Project Gutenberg Ebook, May 2016  
[[https://www.gutenberg.org/files/2811/2811-h/2811-h.htm#link2H\\_4\\_0005](https://www.gutenberg.org/files/2811/2811-h/2811-h.htm#link2H_4_0005)]

PLUTARCH *Fall of the Roman Republic*, trans. Rex Warner, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1958

PLUTARCH *The Makers of Rome*, trans. I. Scott-Kilvert, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1965

SENECA *Apocolocyntosis*, in *The Satyricon and The Apocolocyntosis*, trans. J. P. Sullivan, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1986

SUETONIUS, *The Twelve Caesars*, trans. R. Graves, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1979

TACITUS *Agricola, Germanica & Dialogus*, Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press, 1970

TACITUS *The Annals of Imperial Rome*, trans. M. Grant, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1971

TACITUS *Annals and the Histories*, trans. A. Church & W. Brodribb, Chicago, Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1952

### **Modern**

BALDWIN, Barry *Suetonius* Amsterdam, Adolf M. Hakkert, 1983

BAROUD, George "Historiography", in PAGAN, Victoria Emma (ed.) *The Tacitus Encyclopedia*, 2 vols., Gainesville: University of Florida, 2023 [<https://dokumen.pub/the-tacitus-encyclopedia-vol-i-amp-ii-9781119114567-9781119743354-9781119743330-9781444350258.html>]

BEARD, Mary *SPQR: A History of Ancient Rome*, London: Profile Books, 2015

BEARD, Mary *Emperor of Rome: Ruling the Ancient Roman World*, London: Profile Books, 2023

BENARIO, Herbert W. "Tacitus and the Principate", *Classical Journal*, Vol. 60, 1964, pp97-106

BIRLEY, Anthony R. "The Life and Death of Cornelius Tacitus", *Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte*, Vol. 49 no 2, 2000, pp. 230-247

BRODEY, Thomas & VAN DEN BERG, Christopher S. "Aper, Marcus", in PAGAN, Victoria Emma (ed.) *The Tacitus Encyclopedia*, 2 vols., Gainesville: University of Florida, 2023 [<https://dokumen.pub/the-tacitus-encyclopedia-vol-i-amp-ii-9781119114567-9781119743354-9781119743330-9781444350258.html>]

COSTA, C.D.N. "The 'Dialogus'" in Dorey, T. *Tacitus*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969, pp19-34

FORNARA, Charles *The Nature of History in Ancient Greek and Rome*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 198

GEERTZ, Clifford "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture", in GEERTZ, Clifford *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*, London, Hutchinson, 1975, pp3-30

GELZER, Matthias *The Roman Nobility*, trans. R. Seager, Oxford, Blackwell, 1969

GRIFFIN, Miriam "Pliny and Tacitus", *Scripta Classica Israelica*, Vol.18, 1999 pp. 139-158

HOLLAND, Tom *Pax: War and Peace in Rome's Golden Age*, London: Abacus Books, 2023

JOSEPH, Timothy *Tacitus the Epic Successor: Virgil, Lucan, and the Narrative of Civil War in the Histories*, Leiden: Brill, 2012

KEITEL, Elizabeth "Principate and Civil War in the Annals of Tacitus", *American Journal of Philology*, 105 no. 3, Autumn 1984, pp306-325

KENNEY, E.J. *The Cambridge History of Classical Literature, Vol II: Latin Literature*, Cambridge, CUP, 1982

LEVICK, B. "A Cry from the Heart from Tiberius Caesar", *Historia*, 27, 1978, pp95-101

LIGHTFOOT, Christopher "Now on View: A Portrait Bust of Emperor Domitian", The Metropolitan Museum, 5 June 2015 [<https://www.metmuseum.org/articles/toledo-museum-loan-exchange>]

LUCE, T.J. "Tacitus' conception of historical change: the problem of discovering the historian's opinions", in MOXON, I.S. et al. (ed.) *Past Perspectives: Studies in Greek and Roman Historical Writing*, Cambridge, CUP, 1986, pp143-157

MARTIN, Ronald *Tacitus*, Berkeley, University of California, 1981

- METZGER, Doug "Our Brutal Age: Horace and the Beginning of Augustan Age Literature", Literature and History Podcast Episode 50, n.d. [<https://literatureandhistory.com/index.php/episode-050-our-brutal-age>]
- OCRE *Online Coins of the Roman Empire*, Numismatic Online Database, American Numismatic Society and the Institute for the Study of the Ancient World at New York University, n.d. [[https://numismatics.org/ocre/results?q=deity\\_facet:%22Fortuna%22](https://numismatics.org/ocre/results?q=deity_facet:%22Fortuna%22)]
- PAGAN, Victoria Emma (ed.) *The Tacitus Encyclopedia*, 2 vols., Gainesville: University of Florida, 2023 [<https://dokumen.pub/the-tacitus-encyclopedia-vol-i-amp-ii-9781119114567-9781119743354-9781119743330-9781444350258.html>]
- REED, Nicholas "Some Neglected Evidence on the Early Career of Tacitus", *The Classical Quarterly*, 26 no. 2, 1976, pp309-314
- SALLER, R.P. *Personal Patronage under the Early Empire*, Cambridge, CUP, 1982
- SCHMITZ, Leonhard "Annulus", in William Smith, *A Dictionary of Greek and Roman Antiquities*, London: John Murray, 1875, pp95-97 [[https://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/secondary/SMIGRA\\*/Annulus.html](https://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/secondary/SMIGRA*/Annulus.html)]
- SCHULZ, Verena *Deconstructing Imperial Representation: Tacitus, Cassius Dio, and Suetonius on Nero and Domitian*, Leiden: Brill, 2019
- SCOTT, Russell T. *Religion and Philosophy in the Histories of Tacitus*, Rome, American Academy of Rome, 1968
- SYME, Ronald *The Roman Revolution*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1974
- SYME, Ronald *Tacitus*, 2 vols., Oxford, Clarendon, 1967
- SYME, Ronald "Tacitus: Some Sources of His Information", *JRS*, 62, 1982, pp68-83
- SYME, Ronald *Ten Studies in Tacitus*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1970
- TALBERT, J.A. *The Senate of Imperial Rome*, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1984
- USHER, Stephen *The Historians of Greece and Rome*, London, Hamish Hamilton, 1969
- WOODMAN, A.J. *Rhetoric in Classical Historiography*, London, Croom Helm, 1988

### Media Treatments and Internet Resources

- The Caesars*, Granada TV Series, 1968 [Six episodes are on You Tube, No 1 can be found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F3x171JkUko&list=PLYvqnf3rH4Xnhmqr-Qcc3IT55IQgR14N8&index=1>]
- METZGER, Doug *The Literature and History Podcast*, ongoing, and index of episodes can be found at <https://literatureandhistory.com/index.php/episodes/all-episodes> [This is a detailed series of podcasts includes treatments of many Latin and Roman writers, including Catullus, Horace, Virgil, Propertius, Ovid, Seneca, Petronius and Juvenal]
- Greek and Latin Texts* can be found via the Thayer Bill Thayer collection at <https://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/home.html>

Copyright © R. James Ferguson 2024

#### **Human-Mind Crafted:**

NB This backgrounder was not written with the aid of AI software or generative tools.

For general access to this and further background briefings, articles, educational works and essays, visit the [Past-and-Future](#) website.