

**scripta 15.2: Tacitus describes the political uncertainty at the prospect of Augustus' death**

This text is taken from Tacitus, Annals 1.4 and describes the fraught political uncertainty at the time of Augustus' death.

As discussed in Chapter 11, Augustus' propaganda focused on the claim that he had restored the Republic. The potential power vacuum at his death brought with it the opportunity for a more meaningful return to Republican structures and the liberty that these promoted. It also, however, brought the risk of civil war if ambitious Romans decided to fight it out in order to move themselves to the top spot. In AD 14 Tiberius, Augustus' adopted son, was declared the next princeps; this created the precedent for what became in effect a hereditary monarchy, cementing the end of the Roman Republic.

In this section, Tacitus acerbically re-creates the private discussions which might have taken place at the time, and focuses on the Romans' thoughts about the possible contenders for Augustus' position. A contrast is drawn between the young and hot-headed Agrippa and the more seasoned Tiberius. The passage focuses on the Romans' fear about the sort of ruler Tiberius would prove to be, the sexual perversions which had dominated his time when he retreated from public life to the island of Rhodes, and the overbearing influence of his mother, Livia.

The passage is an excellent example of Tacitus' interest in rumour and private opinion as a way to provide a contrast with what could be said openly. Tacitus' approach to writing history demonstrates that, for the Romans, history was as much a work of creative imagination and interpretation as it was a matter of unbiased facts.

Augustus had now reached advanced old age and he was weakened by ill-health. The end of his life was near and this led to fresh hope: a few men began to talk again about liberty; a greater number feared civil war while others craved it. The greatest number by far began to discuss their likely masters privately in various ways. Some believed Agrippa to be psychopathic and already enraged by his humiliation, and they did not think that he had the age or experience to make him ready for so great a role. In contrast, they thought that Tiberius Nero was seasoned by life-experience, tried and tested in war, but that he had the age-old and ingrained arrogance of the Claudian family. What's more, they thought that many indications of his savage nature were to the fore. They said that he was a man who had been brought up from infancy in a house laced with a royal mindset; consulships and military triumphs had been heaped upon him from an early age and - when he had withdrawn from public life to the island of Rhodes under the pretence of a retreat - he had done nothing other than indulge his aggression, deception and his secret lusts. They said that his mother was taking the stage with her unrestrained female power and that they would end up enslaved to a woman.

- 1) According to Tacitus, how did people respond to the prospect of Augustus' death? Do you find this surprising in the context of Augustus' success?
- 2) Why do you think some people desired civil war?
- 3) Tacitus says that Tiberius was preferred to Agrippa; from what you can read in this extract, who do you think sounds like the better choice for the next princeps?



B L O O M S B U R Y

4) One of Tacitus' central criticisms about life under the emperors is that Romans had less political freedom as a result. Find as many different details as you can in this passage which suggest that the Romans felt limited in what they could say or do.