



Additional Information on the Reign of Tiberius

Tiberius was an outstanding military general and key player in the complex succession to Augustus, eventually winning the imperial throne with others either dead, disgraced or too inexperienced. With one exception, the sources present him as a cryptic ruler who made no real attempt to win the support of the lower and upper classes.

The Views of Classical Authors on Tiberius' Reign

The sources on Tiberius are hugely varied, with some finding qualities to admire whilst others highlight his hypocrisy, cruelty, and perversity.

Tacitus portrays Tiberius in the worst possible light. However, his account is not derived from first-hand experience, but based on documents that he had access to as a senator, literary accounts of Tiberius that already existed, and rumours which were impossible to verify. The Tiberius portrayed by Tacitus is cryptic, harsh, perverted, reticent and cold; he is inscrutable to the Senate. He stands in stark contrast to Augustus and is presented as an unworthy successor (*Annals* 1.10.7). Tacitus writes from the perspective of a senator and often portrays events in the context of the relationship between emperor and the senators. However, he also claims that he is writing for a morally didactic purpose (*Annals* 3.65), so that “deeds may be attended by the dread of posterity and infamy”. Thus he is apt to highlight failings so that they are not repeated. The account from the later historian Dio Cassius are broadly in line with Tacitus; he too would have been aware of common traditions and used common documents. Dio in fact used the *Annals* as his main source. Suetonius at least acknowledges that Tiberius was at first most deferential and courteous to senators (*Tiberius* 27, 29-32) before a change after the death of his son in AD 23 (*Tiberius* 33).

Conversely, Velleius Paterculus gives a highly positive view of Tiberius' reign and we shall see throughout this section just how different Velleius' interpretation of events is. One brief example will elucidate this. Suetonius (*Tiberius* 47) claims that “no magnificent public works” took place under Tiberius; Velleius Paterculus (2.130.1) comments on the “magnificent public buildings” that Tiberius erected. Regardless on the relative necessity of Tiberius' building programme following the extensive works of Augustus, the disparity between the two sources is marked and should caution us about being over-credulous.

Nowhere is this disparity more marked than in the varying accounts of Tiberius' accession. Undoubtedly this was a period of uncertainty for the entire Roman world. Following the death of Augustus there was no precedent for Tiberius to follow. Although Augustus had made him his heir, had given him proconsular *imperium* equal to his own, and had clearly groomed him in the public eye as his successor, he could do no more than that. When Augustus died, the *auctoritas* which he had acquired through his long pre-eminence and particular personality, died with him. It was this that Tiberius lacked. But Tiberius had immediately to exercise power, and be seen to be doing so, *vis-à-vis* the people and the army, while at the same time appearing to the Senate as not wanting to do so, waiting for them to confer upon him the authority to do what he had already done. By trying not to offend the susceptibilities of the Senate, he laid himself open to Tacitus' charge of blatant hypocrisy.



Tiberius was not aided by the rebellion of the Pannonian legions (Tacitus, *Annals* 1.16-1.18) which was swiftly followed by a second mutiny from the German legions based at Mainz (Tacitus, *Annals* 1.28-1.35). Neither of these were particularly 'political' in nature, although the German legions preferred Germanicus to be Emperor, rather they were motivated by the fact that many soldiers had been underpaid or had exceeded their terms of service, yet had not been released. The moment highlights the fact that the periods of accession were fraught, as in the period of the transfer of power the opportunity for crisis was far greater.

Tiberius, who had already irked the Senate by his inarticulacy and seeming hypocrisy (Tacitus, *Annals* 1.11-12) despatched **Drusus** to deal with the Pannonian rebellion, while Germanicus subdued the German legions. Tacitus gives a very long and detailed account of the rebellions – covering some 37 chapters of Book 1 of the *Annals* – using them to highlight character traits of both Tiberius and Germanicus. For example, in *Annals* 1.46 Tiberius appears highly ineffective, at least in the eyes of the contemporary people; while in *Annals* 1.52 when the mutinies are eventually suppressed his delight is mixed with concern that Germanicus has now become too popular with the soldiery.

Velleius Paterculus by contrast presents the accession as seamless, and Tiberius seems to deal with the mutinies almost overnight by his “long experience as an army commander” (2.125.3).

These events, along with other aspects of Tiberius' accession reinforce the need for a critical understanding of the reliability of our sources. Given that they all write with a definite agenda, we must be diligent in our approach to their material.

Study Question

Study the following sources:

- Tacitus, *Annals* 1.11.1-15.3;
- Suetonius, *Tiberius* 23-24;
- Velleius Paterculus, *History of Rome* 2.125.1-126.4.

How do these three sources compare with one another?

What are their opinions on Tiberius as a ruler?

What may their opinions tell us about their own biases?



Tiberius' Relationships with Germanicus and Sejanus

Given Tacitus' moralistic style of writing, it is perhaps not surprising that for him the vast majority of his historical characters are portrayed with a very black-and-white morality; some are 'heroes', others 'villains'. This is particularly marked in the presentation of **Germanicus** and **Sejanus**, two key figures in the Tiberian period.

Having been forced into adopting Germanicus in AD 4 by Augustus, Tiberius was clearly expected to further the young man's career as a potential successor to the imperial throne. But given that Tiberius already had a son, this was always to be problematic. What is more, Germanicus was a capable military leader, who inspired the loyalty of his troops, as had been revealed by their desire to make him emperor (Tacitus, *Annals* 1.35.3; Velleius Paterculus 2.125.1). Germanicus was capable and popular, something which clearly perturbed Tiberius and, according to Tacitus, led him to see Germanicus as a threat.

The key moment came in AD 17 when a number of issues arose in the eastern provinces, in particular Judaea and Syria (Tacitus, *Annals* 2.41.2-42.5). Tiberius suggested that Germanicus be despatched to the East to settle matters (*Annals* 2.43). This had the advantage of seeming to use the political capability of the young man to the fullest degree, but also the added benefit of sending Germanicus far from the region of his popular military support. However, Tiberius also chose this moment to replace the governor of Syria with **Gnaeus Calpurnius Piso**.

Tacitus (*Annals* 2.43.4) suggests that Piso believed that he had been installed in Syria to "curb Germanicus' hopes". Tacitus here highlights the factionalism within the imperial court as groups became attached to individuals whom they believed would one day hold imperial power, with people flocking to Germanicus because of Tiberius' apparent disaffection for him.

In AD 18, Germanicus begins to travel to the East (*Annals* 2.53; 2.55), being welcomed and lauded everywhere he stops. Yet Piso, travelling later than Germanicus, stops everywhere he had and begins to undermine him (2.55.1). Piso overtakes Germanicus at Rhodes and arrives in Syria first, where he begins to turn the legions to his side through "lavishness and favouritism" (*Annals*, 2.55.5). The two men finally confront one another and part in open hatred (*Annals*, 2.57.3).

AD 19 begins with Germanicus visiting the province of Egypt, but without the permission of Tiberius (*Annals*, 59.2). Tiberius sees this very much as a challenge to his authority, and in truth as a senator Germanicus needed to seek the permission of the Princeps before going to Egypt in-keeping with the Augustan practice. While he is away, Piso continues to undermine his activities (*Annals*, 2.69.1) and upon Germanicus' return to Syria Piso elects to leave. However, at this point Germanicus falls seriously ill and dies.

During his illness, Germanicus is convinced that he has been poisoned by Piso (*Annals*, 2.69.3), and that Tiberius was involved: in his dying words to his wife **Agrippina**, he warns her not to anger those in power by which he showed his "dread of Tiberius" (*Annals*, 2.72.1).

The outcome of this episode is that Piso is brought back for trial in Rome, but the main charge is that of fomenting civil war in the province of Syria. Piso commits suicide when he realises that Tiberius is not going to step in and assist him (*Annals*, 3.15.3). The Senate still pass a series of judgements over him and his two sons, but the impression we get is that Tiberius is very much trying to resolve the matter as quickly as possible.

Indeed, Tacitus uses the entire episode to highlight the degree of cruelty in Tiberius, as well as how much he is separate from the common people of Rome. When news of Germanicus' illness reaches Rome, the people grieve to an extreme degree and speculate that Tiberius had a hand in his death



(*Annals*, 2.82.1-2). Tiberius refuses even to meet Agrippina when she returns to Italy with Germanicus' ashes (*Annals*, 3.3.1) and limits the public honours for Germanicus, encouraging the people to end their grieving (*Annals*, 3.6.1). Tiberius appears cold and distant, and in Tacitus' version there is no real grief for the loss of his adopted son.

Velleius Paterculus' version of the events is far briefer (2.130.3-130.4), where he glosses over the death of Germanicus as merely one of Tiberius' misfortunes, with the real issue being the "sorrow, fury, and shame" that he was forced to endure because of the subsequent actions of Agrippina and her sons in their hostility towards him.

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the full account of the Germanicus and Piso episode in Tacitus' *Annals* 2.53-61; 2.69-3.18.4.

Highlight the aspects of the text where Tacitus makes very clear his opinions on the characters of Tiberius, Germanicus, and Piso and the relationships between them.

You may also be interested to read the *Senatorial Decree concerning Gnaeus Calpurnius Piso* (SCPP). This record from AD 20 gives a different account of the trial and punishment of Piso to that found in Tacitus. It is available as Source P3 in LACTOR 19.

If for Tacitus Tiberius is the villain, then Sejanus is very much his right-hand man. It is difficult to convincingly describe the level of vitriol that Tacitus deploys against Sejanus, but he is blackened like no other character in the *Annals*. He is accused of being sexually perverse (4.1.2), corrupt and power-hungry (4.1.3), and able to manipulate Tiberius to a tremendous degree (4.1.2). Sejanus is the prime example of the type of political opportunist who prospered under the Principate. When power rests in the hands of a single individual, it can easily be abused and usurped. That is what Sejanus sought to do.

As commander of the Praetorian Guard Sejanus had privileged access to Tiberius and quickly exploited this for his own ends, that is engineering himself into the succession. Tiberius' credulity where Sejanus is concerned may be explained by the fact that, at the outset of his reign, he begged the Senate for colleagues to assist him (*Annals*, 1.11.1; Suetonius, *Tiberius* 25). Finding no ready volunteers from within that body, it is unsurprising that he came to rely so heavily on Sejanus.

Velleius Paterculus, whose history was published before Sejanus' eventual downfall, is glowing about him (2.127.1-128.4), calling him a "distinguished assistant", that he enjoyed a "long-standing regard" from both people and emperor, and that he "shared the burdens of the imperial office". Here we see once again the sycophancy of the Senate towards the powerful. Dio (*Roman History*, 58.4.1) affirms this view, claiming that the senators and other sections of society treated Sejanus "as if he were actually emperor", and that Tiberius called him the "Sharer of my Cares".

The rise of Sejanus included some particularly nefarious deeds, not the least of which was the (alleged) murder of Tiberius' son Drusus in AD 23, his rival for the throne (*Annals*, 4.7-11), the seduction of Drusus' wife Livilla, and his subsequent attempts to convince Tiberius to allow him to marry her (*Annals*, 4.39).

Tiberius' refusal to allow the marriage was the first real impediment to Sejanus' ambitions, so he contrived to convince Tiberius to leave Rome altogether, heading first to Campania in AD 25, and thence to Capri in AD 26 (*Annals*, 4.41). Tiberius' readiness to accede to such suggestions may seem surprising, but we must remember that he had frequently absented himself from Rome during



Augustus' reign, and must now have been wearied by the role of Princeps, for which from the start he had claimed to be unsuitable. Tacitus (*Annals* 4.57) also offers some other alternatives.

Following Tiberius' withdrawal, Sejanus was effectively the centre of power in Rome. Dio (58.5.1) summarises the situation as "it was he who appeared to be emperor and Tiberius a kind of off-shore monarch." The Senate are particularly sycophantic towards Sejanus, highlighting yet again that they were very much a spent force in political terms. Yet in AD 31, a change overtakes Tiberius, which he claimed in his autobiography was prompted by Sejanus' persecution of Germanicus sons Nero and Drusus (III) (Suetonius, *Tiberius* 61.1), whom as other potential successors were clear targets for Sejanus in his rise to power. there are also some reports that Sejanus' abandoned wife, Apicata, informed Tiberius of Sejanus' hand in the death of Tiberius' son Drusus.

Sejanus' end was sudden and involved all of the political machinations that he had so often employed himself (see Dio 58.8.4-10.8). The Senate and people, who had fawned over him on his rise, quickly abandoned him vilifying the man in the same breath as they revealed their own hypocrisy (Dio 58.10.7). He and his children were executed, in a particularly brutal fashion (Dio 58.11.5). Thus the career of the arch-political opportunist ended in ignominy.

Study Question

Examine the following sources:

- Dio 58.4.14 and 58.5.1-7;
- Velleius Paterculus 2.127.1-128.4;
- Suetonius 61-63.

Highlight the key opinions expressed on Sejanus therein.

How much agreement in the sources is there on the relationship between Tiberius and Sejanus.
