THREE PROBLEMS IN TACITUS' ANNALS I

BY

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I. Annals I 5-6

Does Tacitus, in his relation of Tiberius' accession, really prejudice our interpretation of the rest of the reign? Further, is the disposal of Agrippa Postumus contrived to serve as an "ominous opening" for the reign? 1)

It is true that in chapter 5, where the death of Augustus and Tiberius' accession are narrated, there is an uncomfortable feeling of intrigue. This is because of the popular rumour concerning Augustus' supposed reconciliation with Agrippa Postumus. The rumour is a natural sequel to chapter 4, where Agrippa had, in the popular mind at any rate, been elevated to the position of being a possible rival of Tiberius. Tacitus does not, however, commit himself to the story of the reconciliation. Why then does he mention it? To prejudice the reader without taking responsibility for the suggestion? Rather, it is because he recognises its importance in his effort to recapture the prevailing atmosphere of the time.

Tacitus then goes on to describe the measures taken by Livia. She is, at this stage, a villain only in the popular imagination; for again Tacitus does not himself hold her responsible for anything underhand. Martin suggests that Tacitus "borrowed" the facts from the Agrippina/Nero episode (Ann. XII 66 ff.). But are there not important differences between the two accounts? In the latter case, Agrippina's guilt is stated as a certainty, and the plot to kill Claudius is vividly narrated. In the case of Augustus' death, however, Tacitus concentrates upon rumour; as he saw it, this was to have an important bearing on Tiberius' behaviour.

1) C. W. Mendell, Tacitus, the Man and his Work (Yale 1957), 126. R. H. Martin, Tacitus and the Death of Augustus, CQ 1955, 123 ff.
The search for similarities is continued into chapter 6, with especial notice being taken of the opening words of I 6 and XIII 1 1). If Tacitus is trying to mark a similarity by his choice of words, why should he ruin the effect by treating the two chapters in an entirely different way? With the murder of Junius Silanus, Tacitus recounts the deed and Agrippina’s reasons for it, pointing out that Nero was completely in the dark. In the case of Agrippa, Tacitus reports the murder with obvious disapproval 2); but here the emperor is involved too: “Propius vero Tiberium ac Liviam, illum metu, hanc novercalibus odiis, suspecti et invisi iuvenis caedem festinavisse” (Ann. I 6, 4). The nature of his involvement follows on from the previous two chapters; for feelings about Agrippa that Tacitus attributes to Tiberius (“metu” and “suspecti”) both stem from the rumours that had surrounded the young man. Having perhaps been further encouraged by Livia, whose own feelings for Agrippa (“novercalibus odiis” and “invisi”) were more bitter, Tiberius now found himself with a murder committed, and which had to be answered for.

The most important difference between the two episodes lies in Tacitus’ relation of Tiberius’ subsequent behaviour; here he does more to illuminate the character of the new emperor and the difficulties it caused. Tiberius’ first reaction after the murder was naive—to blame Augustus; for public opinion was convinced that Augustus and Agrippa had been reconciled. His second was equally futile, but more dangerous. By denying his complicity and presumably trying to have the blame publicly shifted to Sallustius (“Is ad tribunum miserat codicillos”) (Ann. I 6, 6), he was endangering the fabric of the principate. This is evidently the point that Tacitus is making by reporting Sallustius’ warning to Livia: “... ne arcana domus, ne consilia amicorum, ministeria militum vulgarentur, neve Tiberius vim principatus resolveret cuncta ad senatum vocando” (Ann. I 6, 6). With “ne ... vulgarentur” and “neve ... vocando”, Tacitus is marking two important imperial concepts,

1) Ann. I 6, 1 “Primum facinus novi principatus ...”. Ann. XIII 1, 1 “Prima novo principatu mors ...”.
2) “... Postumi Agrippae caedes, quem ignarum inermumque quamvis firmatus animo centurio aegre confecit".