

## TACITUS From The Annals: On the Legacy of Augustus 98 C.E.

*The historian Tacitus (ca. 56-118 C.E.) was born in Gaul, moved to Rome, and held several important positions there, including the office of consul for the Roman Empire. He survived a reign of terror by Emperor Domitian, which made him distrust the power of the Roman emperors. One of his works, The Annals, describes the first dynasty of emperors who succeeded the emperor Augustus. In this passage, Tacitus describes how Romans thought about Augustus's legacy upon his death.*

On the day of the funeral, soldiers stood as if forming a garrison, much to the derision of those who had seen personally or who had heard from their parents about that day of still undigested servitude and of freedom served up again unsuccessfully when the slaughter of the dictator Caesar seemed to some the worst of acts, to others the finest. Now, they said, an elderly princeps, despite the longevity of his power and has even provided the state with resources in the form of heirs, would evidently require protect-ing by military assistance to ensure that his burial was peaceful!

Afterward there was much conversation about Augustus himself, with the majority in empty wonder that the day of his first receiving com-mand all that time ago was the same as the last of his life, and that he had ended his life in the same bedroom of the house at Nola as his father, Octavius. Also celebrated was the number of his consulships, in which he had equaled Valerius Corvus<sup>15</sup> and C. Marius<sup>16</sup> jointly; the continuation of his tribunician power for thirty-seven years; the name of "commander," acquired twenty-one times, and his other honors, whether multiplied or novel.

Among the perspicacious, however, his life was variously extolled or criticized. The former said that, because of devotion to his parent and the requirements of the state, in which at that time there had been no place for law, he had been driven to civil war, which could be neither prepared for nor maintained by good behavior. He had made many concessions to Antonius while avenging himself on the killers of his father; 'many to Lepidus;<sup>17</sup> after the latter had aged from apathy, and the former had been sunk by these lusts, there had been no other remedy for his disaffected fatherland than that it be ruled by one man. Yet it was neither on kingly rule nor dic-tatorship but on the name of "princeps" that the state had been based. The empire was cordoned by the sea of Ocean or distant streams; legions, prov-inces, fleets, everything was interconnected; there was legality among citi-zens, restraint among allies; the City itself was magnificent in its apparel; just a few things had been handled by force to ensure peace for the rest.

It was said on the other side that devotion to his parent and the times in the state had been taken up as a screen; in reality it was in a desire for domination that veterans had been mustered by his lavishness, an army procured by a juvenile in his private capacity, a consul's legions bribed, and support for the Pompeian party pretended. Subsequently, when by a decree of the fathers he had assailed the fasces and prerogative of a praetor, after the slaughter of Hirtius and Pansa<sup>18</sup> (whether they had been carried off by the enemy, or Pansa by poison poured into a wound and Hirtius by his own soldiers and by Caesar's engineering of guile) he had taken over the forces of both. The consulship had been extorted from an unwilling senate, and the arms which he had been given to deal with Antonius were turned against the state. The proscription of citizens and distributions of land had not been praised even by those who did them. Of course, the ends of Cassius and the Bruti had been a concession to paternal antagonisms (although it was proper to forgo private hatreds for the public good); but Pompeius had been deceived by a phantom peace, Lepidus by a display of friendship, and subsequently Antonius, enticed by the Tarentine and Brundisian treaties and by a wedding to his sister, <sup>19</sup> had paid the penalty of a guileful relationship with his death. Peace there had been without doubt

after that, but gory: there had been the Lollian and Varian disasters and the killing at Rome of Varrones, Egnatii, and Iulli.<sup>20</sup>

Nor was there any abstention from family matters. Nero's wife had been abducted from him, and there was the mockery of consulting pontiffs on the question of whether it was right for her to wed after conceiving but before producing a child. [ ... ] and Vedius Pollio's luxuriousness.<sup>21</sup> Finally, there was Livia,<sup>22</sup> her burden on the state as a mother being matched by that on the Caesars' family as a stepmother. Nothing was left with which to honor the gods since he wished himself to be worshiped with temples and with the likenesses of a divinity by flamines and priests. Not even Tiberius had been adopted as successor through any affection or any concern for the state, but because he had had insight into the man's arrogance and savagery, by the basest of comparisons, he had sought glory for himself. (Indeed, a few years before, when Augustus was again demanding tribunician power from the fathers for Tiberius, despite an honorific speech, he had tossed out some comments on his demeanor, lifestyle, and habits in order to decry what he seemed to defend.)

As for his burial, once it had been completed according to custom, a temple, and heavenly rituals were decreed. Prayers were then redirected toward Tiberius, and he, for his part, began to talk variously about the magnitude of command and his own limitations: only Divine Augustus had been mentally capable of such a great undertaking on his own, having himself been summoned by Augustus for partnership in his cares, he had learned by experience how steep, how exposed to fortune, was the burden of ruling everything. Accordingly, in a community supported by such numbers of illustrious men, it should not be the case that they tendered all things to a single individual: several would more easily carry out the responsibilities of the state by sharing the labor.

## READING QUESTIONS

1. What are Augustus' two views presented in this passage?
2. Reading between the lines, how do you think Tacitus feels about Augustus? What tone does he use to describe Augustus?
3. How does Tacitus describe Tiberius, Augustus's successor?

---

15 **Valerius Corvus:** Was consul six times and defeated one of Rome's earliest enemies, the Samnites.

16 **C. Marius:** Reformed the Roman army, making it personally loyal to its commanders. He was consul seven times.

17 **Lepidus:** One of Caesar's most trusted generals and a Triumvir with Antony and Octavian (later Augustus).

18 **Hirtius and Pansa:** Consuls for the year 43. Both died fighting Antony in northern Italy, and Octavian took control of their armies.

19 **Antonus ...** a wedding to his sister: Antony married Octavian's sister before falling in love with Cleopatra.

20 **the Lollian and Varian disasters, ... Iulli:** Roman troops led by Lollius and Yams were defeated, and a few Roman aristocrats were executed for treason.

21 **Vedius Pollio's luxuriousness:** Vedius Pollio was known for feeding his slaves to eels and for excessive living. He was rebuked by Augustus for the treatment of his slaves.

22 **Livia:** Octavian married Livia while she was pregnant with her first husband's child.