

## A Brazen Attempt at Mediocrity: The Narrow Limits of Glory in Tacitus' *Agricola*

According to Lavan (2001: 294) the Roman and British narratives of Tacitus' *Agricola* are not to be read separately, but as parts of a unified whole inextricably woven together. This paper extends that observation to Tacitus' representation of British geography, asserting that it contains an implicit critique of Domitian's intolerance of individual accomplishment, especially military accomplishment. Since significant portions of this eulogy describe the geography of Britain, and since the martial glory Agricola attained there is allegedly the chief reason that Domitian had him poisoned (Ag.43.2-3), the geographical excursus helps define Agricola's excellence and delineates unsafe parameters of achievement under a paranoid and oppressive emperor. If Tacitus portrayed Britain as a place beyond the edges of the known world and the Pillars of Hercules as argued by Clarke (2001: 98) and Dorey (1969:17), then Agricola's campaign on the island would have been an accomplishment of majestic proportions, and the reputation he achieved thereby commensurately sublime. I argue, however, that the topography of Britain in the *Agricola* is, in fact, quite colonial and tame, especially when compared to Tacitean descriptions of Germany and its people in the *Germania* and *Annales* (according to Sallman (1987: 123) the *Germania* and *Agricola* were companion pamphlets).

Note that Tacitus himself situates the Pillars of Hercules not in Britain, but in the Hyperborean regions of Germany (*Ger.*34.2). Further, the campaign of Germanicus against the Germans in the second book of the *Annales* is fraught with perilous swamps, oceans and people, and the trip home involves a naval disaster so costly that it alienates Tiberius (2.24-5). The journey across the channel to Britain in the *Agricola*, on the other hand, is so uneventful that it is either not mentioned at all (5.1), or encapsulated in a few words (*transvectis legionibus auxiliisque*, 13.3; *transgressus*, 18.1; *nave prima transgressus*, 24.1.). The Britons themselves,

having been thoroughly conquered and acculturated by Vespasian in the reign of Claudius (*domitae gentes*, Ag.13.3), contrast sharply with the wild, indomitable Germans who smear their faces with blood and hang the heads of men in trees to commemorate victory (*Ann.*1.61).

The tameness and colonialism of Britain and its people implies that the martial glory Agricola achieved there was actually quite moderate, and in line with the obsequious quietism of his character as it emerges in the course of the eulogy (for Agricola's quietism see Walker, 1951: 219 and Liebeschuetz, 1966: 126). The assessment of Domitian's intolerance of individual accomplishment thereby becomes more scathing: under this particular emperor, even a conservative general, who was as careful as he could be not to attract too much attention, fell into fatal disfavor because martial excellence itself was strictly an imperial prerogative (*ducis boni imperatoriam virtutem esse*, Ag. 39.2).

In the end, there is no safety at all for an individual who achieves even moderate notoriety as a general under Domitian. By linking Domitian's hostility toward excellence and glory to those who praise said virtues (Ag.41.1) Tacitus invites us to extend the oppressive restriction on military accomplishment into the sphere of panegyric, and writing in general. Thus, within the assessment of Domitian's intolerance of Agricola Tacitus offers an implicit justification for the awkward tardiness of his father in law's *laudatio funebris* and the long delay in the emergence of his authorial voice: survival has been contingent upon silence.

#### Works Cited

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