

Tacitus and the Principate's Bloody Peace

In her article "Principate and Civil War in the *Annals* of Tacitus" (1984), Elizabeth Keitel clearly outlined how Tacitus portrayed the Principate as the continuation of civil war. She eloquently and definitively argued that Tacitus' Principate was the institutionalization of *stasis*. If Keitel is correct, and I presume she is, then there is a need for the re-examination, not of how Tacitus portrays *stasis*, but how he portrays the imperial peace. In this paper, I will proceed by exploring how Tacitus presents the ideas of *pax*, *tranquillitas* and *otium* as contested terms. I will look at a number of passages outside of the *Annales* (*Dial.* 38.2, *Hist.* 1.1.1) which Keitel did not include in her study in an attempt to broaden the conclusions drawn from Tacitus' portrayal of peace under the Principate.

Throughout his writings, Tacitus makes a number of what appear to be positive statements about *pax* and *princeps*. The most highly touted and seemingly innocuous of his statements occurs at *Historiae* 1.1.1: *postquam bellatum apud Actium atque omnem potentiam ad unum conferri pacis interfuit* ("after it was fought out at Actium and the interests of peace conferred every power to one man"). This passage could be read as Tacitus' support for the *pax Augusta*. Yet when the context is taken into account, it becomes clear that the *pax Augusta* was responsible for demise of Roman historiography (*magna illa ingenia cessere*), which had previously been written with an equal sense of *libertas* and *eloquentia*.

In the *Dialogus*, Tacitus has a similarly innocuous statement spoken by the interlocutor Maternus: *postquam longa temporum quies et continuum populi otium et assidua senatus tranquillitas et maxima principis disciplina ipsam quoque eloquentiam sicut omnia depacaverat* (*Dial.* 38.2, "after a long period of quiet, the continuous leisure of the people, the unbroken repose of the senate, and the most effective governance of the *princeps* had thoroughly pacified

eloquence itself just as everything else.”). This passage too has often been read as Maternus’, and Tacitus’, affirmation of the Principate. Here too though, the context reveals that Maternus is being ironic. Again what peace has brought is the end of eloquence and *libertas*.

From the earliest chapters of the *Annales*, Tacitus presents a challenging portrayal of *pax* under Augustus’ Principate: it is a tool to deceive his opponents (1.10.3 *Pompeium imagine pacis . . . deceptos*), and it is bloody (1.10.4 *pacem sine dubio post haec, verum cruentam*). The *pax* of the Principate acts as a means towards servitude just as effectively as outright war. Throughout all his works, Tacitus depicts *pax*, not as a welcome respite from war like the Augustan poets, but as the agent of servility. In the *Agricola*, Tacitus describes *pax* as more dreadful than *bellum* (20.1). In the *Historiae*, Cerialis presents the Gauls with the opportunity for *pax*, which is really the opportunity for *obsequium* and *securitas* (4.74). These are the same terms which the Romans themselves had been given; those who refused to display *obsequium* were often regarded as enemies of the Roman state. The best example of this is the historian Cremutius Cordus, whose histories praised Cassius and Brutus unduly. In his defense speech before the senate, Cremutius asks whether he was fomenting civil war by portraying Brutus and Cassius at Philippi. The answer as demonstrated by his condemnation is yes; Cremutius through his lack of *obsequium* stands before the senate as if on the battlefield of Philippi.

But *obsequium* is a bad word for free Romans; *otium* is much more effective for seducing Augustus’ Romans as Tacitus writes at *Annales* 1.2.1 (*dulcedine otii pellexit*). *Otium* too, which should be the salubrious result of *pax*, has been perverted as a result of the perpetuation of *stasis*. Tacitus’ *otium* is not the productive leisure of Cicero (*De Rep.* 1.2) or even his contemporary Pliny (*Ep.* 1.9.6-8). For Tacitus, *otium* is a step on the path from freedom to servitude (*Ag.* 11.4) or the forced retirement of an experienced advisor (*Ann.* 14.53.3).

In addition to documenting how the Principate propagated *stasis*, Tacitus also depicts how the Principate perverted *pax* and *otium*. For Tacitus, *pax* is not the cessation of war but rather the surrender of *libertas*, and *otium* is a demonstration of servitude not the expression of one's *dignitas*.