

The Characterization of Germanicus and the German Campaign: Tacitus' View of the Early Principate

Germanicus was once called “the one truly virtuous figure” in Tacitus’ *Annales*, “the only one...who is both good and great” (Dudley, 1968, 100-101). This was for many years the ready interpretation, and, indeed, there is enough ostensible praise of Drusus’ son to have led many to perceive him as a hero, the man the author would have preferred to see in the place of Tiberius and acting as a foil to that emperor. Of course, things are rarely what they seem in Tacitus, and the representation of Germanicus is no exception. More subtle readings of this representation now abound, and the bibliography on Tacitus’ treatment of him is long and varied. This paper attempts to add to those readings by looking specifically at the characterization of Germanicus in Germany, comparing the implications of that image to the claims made about him in his obituary and considering what this says about Tacitus’ view of the early principate. Germanicus, as we shall see, is not what he appears to be, because Rome is not what it appears to be, not what it once was. Distinctions of good and evil, success and failure, glory and shame are no longer clear. The proper order, that is to say the old political order, has been perverted and replaced. The new order is typified by the failure of Germanicus to be truly great, while others, quite contrary to expectation and tradition, succeed. Chaos reigns in a Rome where wealth, rank, and power are won by treachery and trickery, not by skill and valor. The complex and ironic characterization of Germanicus in book one of *Annales*, taken together with certain linguistic and structural ploys elsewhere in the text, serves as a bitter reflection of Tacitus’ view of the Roman political arena, disrupted and distorted under the early principate.

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