

The Death of Germanicus and the Imperial Power

Read carefully the following passages by Suetonius and Tacitus and compare the treatment of Germanicus, his death in AD 19 and the events that followed it. How do both authors depict Germanicus, Tiberius, Piso and Agrippina the Elder? Think about the treatment given to Germanicus' travels to the East and his presence in Egypt, as well as about the reactions after his death. Why was this affair so relevant for Tacitus and for the state? Think about the aims and backgrounds of these texts? We will discuss all this in class, so please take with you a copy of the handout.

Suetonius, Life of Tiberius

52 He (Tiberius) had a father's affection neither for his own son Drusus nor his adopted son Germanicus, being exasperated at the former's vices; and, in fact, Drusus led a somewhat loose and dissolute life. Therefore, even when he died, Tiberius was not greatly affected, but almost immediately after the funeral returned to his usual routine, forbidding a longer period of mourning. Nay, more, when a deputation from Ilium offered him somewhat belated condolences, he replied with a smile, as if the memory of his bereavement had faded from his mind, that they, too, had his sympathy for the loss of their eminent fellow-citizen Hector. As to Germanicus, he was so far from appreciating him, that he made light of his illustrious deeds as unimportant, and railed at his brilliant victories as ruinous to his country. He even made complaint in the senate when Germanicus, on the occasion of a sudden and terrible famine, went to Alexandria without consulting him. It is even believed that he caused his death at the hands of Gnaeus Piso, governor of Syria, and some think that when Piso was tried on that charge, he would have produced his instructions, had not Tiberius caused them to be taken from him when Piso privately showed them, and the man himself to be put to death. Because of this the words, "Give us back Germanicus," were posted in many places, and shouted at night all over the city. And Tiberius afterwards strengthened this suspicion by cruelly abusing the wife and children of Germanicus as well.

53 When his daughter-in-law Agrippina was somewhat outspoken in her complaints after her husband's death, he took her by the hand and quoted a Greek verse, meaning, "Do you think a wrong is done you, dear daughter, if you are not empress?" After that he never deigned to hold any conversation with her. Indeed, after she showed fear of tasting an apple which he handed her at dinner, he even ceased to invite her to his table, alleging that he had been charged with an attempt to poison her; but as a matter of fact, the whole affair had been pre-arranged, that he should offer her the fruit to test her, and that she should refuse it as containing certain death. 2 At last, falsely charging her with a desire to take refuge, now at the statue of Augustus and now with the armies, he exiled her to Pandataria, and when she loaded him with reproaches, he had her beaten by a centurion until one of her eyes was destroyed. Again, when she resolved to die of starvation, he had her mouth pried open and food crammed into it. Worst of all, when she persisted in her resolution and so perished, he assailed her memory with the basest slanders, persuading the senate to add her birthday to the days of ill omen, and actually taking credit to

himself for not having had her strangled and her body cast out on the Stairs of Mourning. He even allowed a decree to be passed in recognition of this remarkable clemency, in which thanks were offered him and a golden gift was consecrated to Jupiter of the Capitol.

Tacitus, Annals

Germanicus in the East:

Book II

43 These circumstances, then, and the events in Armenia, which I mentioned above, were discussed by Tiberius before the senate. "The commotion in the East," he added, "could only be settled by the wisdom of Germanicus: for his own years were trending to their autumn, and those of Drusus were as yet scarcely mature." There followed a decree of the Fathers, delegating to Germanicus the provinces beyond the sea, with powers overriding, in all regions he might visit, those of the local governors holding office by allotment or imperial nomination. Tiberius, however, had removed Creticus Silanus from Syria — he was a marriage connection of Germanicus, whose eldest son, Nero, was plighted to his daughter — and had given the appointment to Gnaeus Piso, a man of ungoverned passions and constitutional insubordinacy. For there was a strain of wild arrogance in the blood.

53 The following year found Tiberius consul for a third time; Germanicus, for a second. The latter, however, entered upon that office in the Achaian town of Nicopolis, which he had reached by skirting the Illyrian coast after a visit to his brother Drusus, then resident in Dalmatia: the passage had been stormy both in the Adriatic and, later, in the Ionian Sea. He spent a few days, therefore, in refitting the fleet; while at the same time, evoking the memory of his ancestors, he viewed the gulf immortalized by the victory of Actium, together with the spoils which Augustus had consecrated, and the camp of Antony. For Augustus, as I have said, was his great-uncle, Antony his grandfather; and before his eyes lay the whole great picture of disaster and of triumph. — He next arrived at Athens; where, in deference to our treaty with an allied and time-honoured city, he made use of one lictor alone. The Greeks received him with most elaborate compliments, and, in order to temper adulation with dignity, paraded the ancient doings and sayings of their countrymen.

54 From Athens he visited Euboea, and crossed over to Lesbos; where Agrippina, in her last confinement, gave birth to Julia. Entering the outskirts of Asia, and the Thracian towns of Perinthus and Byzantium, he then struck through the straits of the Bosphorus and the mouth of the Euxine, eager to make the acquaintance of those ancient and storied regions, though simultaneously he brought relief to provinces outworn by internecine feud or official tyranny. On the return journey, he made an effort to visit the Samothracian Mysteries, but was met by northerly winds, and failed to make the shore. So, after an excursion to Troy and those venerable remains which attest the mutability of fortune and the origin of Rome, he skirted the Asian coast once more, and anchored off Colophon, in order to consult the oracle of the Clarian Apollo. Here it is not a prophetess, as at Delphi, but a male priest, chosen out of a restricted number of families, and in most cases imported from Miletus, who hears the number and the names of the consultants, but no more, then descends into a cavern, swallows a draught of water from a mysterious spring, and — though ignorant generally of writing and of metre — delivers his response in set verses dealing with the subject each inquirer had in mind. Rumour said that he had predicted to Germanicus his hastening fate, though in the equivocal terms which oracles affect.

55 Meanwhile Gnaeus Piso, in haste to embark upon his schemes, first alarmed the community of Athens by a tempestuous entry, then assailed them in a virulent speech, which included an indirect attack on Germanicus for "compromising the dignity of the Roman name by his exaggerated civilities, not to the Athenians (whose repeated disasters had extinguished the breed) but to the present cosmopolitan rabble. For these were the men who had leagued themselves with Mithridates against Sulla, with Antony against the deified Augustus!" He upbraided them even with their ancient history; their ill-starred outbreaks against Macedon and their violence towards their own countrymen. Private resentment, also, embittered him against the town, as the authorities refused to give up at his request a certain Theophilus, whom the verdict of the Areopagus had declared guilty of forgery. After this, quick sailing by a short route through the Cyclades brought him up with Germanicus at Rhodes. The prince was aware of the invectives with which he had been assailed; yet he behaved with such mildness that, when a rising storm swept Piso toward the rock-bound coast, and the destruction of his foe could have been referred to misadventure, he sent warships to help in extricating him from his predicament. Even so, Piso was not mollified; and, after reluctantly submitting to the loss of a single day, he left Germanicus and completed the journey first. Then, the moment he reached Syria and the legions, by bounties and by bribery, by attentions to the humblest private, by dismissals of the veteran centurions and the stricter commanding officers, whom he replaced by dependants of his own or by men of the worst character, by permitting indolence in the camp, licence in the towns, and in the country a vagrant and riotous soldiery, he carried corruption to such a pitch that in the language of the rabble he was known as the Father of the Legions. Nor could Plancina contain herself within the limits of female decorum: she attended cavalry exercises and infantry manoeuvres; she flung her gibes at Agrippina or Germanicus; some even of the loyal troops being ready to yield her a disloyal obedience; for a whispered rumour was gaining ground that these doings were not unacceptable to the emperor. The state of affairs was known to Germanicus, but his more immediate anxiety was to reach Armenia first.

56 As news had come at the same time that Germanicus had presented the throne of Armenia to Artaxias, the senate resolved that he and Drusus should receive an ovation upon entering the capital. In addition, arches bearing the effigy of the two Caesars were erected on each side of the temple of Mars the Avenger; while Tiberius showed more pleasure at having kept the peace by diplomacy than if he had concluded a war by a series of stricken fields.

Germanicus in Egypt:

59 In the consulate of Marcus Silanus and Lucius Norbanus, Germanicus set out for Egypt to view its antiquities, though the reason given was solicitude for the province. He did in fact, lower the price of corn by opening the state granaries, and adopted many practices popular with the multitude, walking without his guards, his feet sandalled and his dress identical with that of the Greeks: an imitation of Publius Scipio, who is recorded to have done the like in Sicily, although the Carthaginian war was still raging. Tiberius passed a leniently worded criticism on his dress and bearing, but rebuked him with extreme sharpness for overstepping the prescription of Augustus by entering Alexandria without the imperial consent. For Augustus, among the other secrets of absolutism, by prohibiting all senators or Roman knights of the higher rank from entering the country without permission, kept Egypt isolated; in order that Italy might not be subjected to starvation by anyone who contrived, with however slight a garrison against armies however formidable, to occupy the province and the key-positions by land and sea.

60 Not yet aware, however, that his itinerary was disapproved, Germanicus sailed up the Nile, starting from the town of Canopus — founded by the Spartans in memory of the helmsman so named, who was buried there in the days when Menelaus, homeward bound for Greece, was blown to a distant sea and the Libyan coast. From Canopus he visited the next of the river-mouths, which is sacred to Hercules (an Egyptian born, according to the local account, and the eldest of the name, the others of later date and equal virtue being adopted into the title); then, the vast remains of ancient Thebes. On piles of masonry Egyptian letters still remained, embracing the tale of old magnificence, and one of the senior priests, ordered to interpret his native tongue, related that "once the city contained seven hundred thousand men of military age, and with that army King Rhamses, after conquering Libya and Ethiopia, the Medes and the Persians, the Bactrian and the Scyth, and the lands where the Syrians and Armenians and neighbouring Cappadocians dwell, had ruled over all that lies between the Bithynian Sea on the one hand and the Lycian on the other." The tribute-lists of the subject nations were still legible: the weight of silver and gold, the number of weapons and horses, the temple-gifts of ivory and spices, together with the quantities of grain and other necessities of life to be paid by the separate countries; revenues no less imposing than those which are now exacted by the might of Parthia or by Roman power.

61 But other marvels, too, arrested the attention of Germanicus: in especial, the stone colossus of Memnon, which emits a vocal sound when touched by the rays of the sun; the pyramids reared mountain high by the wealth of emulous kings among wind-swept and all but impassable sands; the excavated lake which receives the overflow of Nile; and, elsewhere, narrow gorges and deeps impervious to the plummet of the explorer. Then he proceeded to Elephantine and Syene, once the limits of the Roman Empire, which now stretches to the Persian Gulf.

Germanicus in Syria and death:

69 On the way from Egypt, Germanicus learned that all orders issued by him to the legions or the cities had been rescinded or reversed. Hence galling references to Piso: nor were the retorts directed by him against the prince less bitter. Then Piso determined to leave Syria. Checked almost immediately by the ill-health of Germanicus, then hearing that he had rallied and that the vows made for his recovery were already being paid, he took his lictors and swept the streets clear of the victims at the altars, the apparatus of sacrifice, and the festive populace of Antioch. After this, he left for Seleucia, awaiting the outcome of the malady which had again attacked Germanicus. The cruel virulence of the p495disease was intensified by the patient's belief that Piso had given him poison; and it is a fact that explorations in the floor and walls brought to light the remains of human bodies, spells, curses, leaden tablets engraved with the name Germanicus, charred and blood-smeared ashes, and others of the implements of witchcraft by which it is believed the living soul can be devoted to the powers of the grave. At the same time, emissaries from Piso were accused of keeping a too inquisitive watch upon the ravages of the disease.

70 Of all this Germanicus heard with at least as much anger as alarm:— "If his threshold was besieged, if he must surrender his breath under the eye of his enemies, what must the future hold in store for his unhappy wife — for his infant children? Poison was considered too dilatory; Piso was growing urgent — imperative — to be left alone with his province and his legions! But Germanicus had not fallen from himself so far, nor should the price of blood remain with the slayer!" He composed a letter renouncing his friendship: the general account adds that he ordered him to leave the province. Delaying no longer, Piso weighed anchor, and regulated his speed so that the return journey should be the shorter, if Germanicus' death opened the door in Syria.

Reactions after the death of Germanicus:

75 Agrippina herself, worn out with grief and physically ill, yet intolerant of every obstacle to revenge, went on board the fleet with her children and the ashes of Germanicus; amid universal pity for this woman of sovereign lineage, her wedded glory went but yesterday to attract the gaze of awed and gratulatory crowds, now carrying in her bosom the relics of the dead, uncertain of her vengeance, apprehensive for herself, cursed in that fruitfulness which had borne but hostages to fortune.

83 Affection and ingenuity vied in discovering and decreeing honours to Germanicus: his name was to be chanted in the Salar Hymn; curule chairs surmounted by oaken crowns were to be set for him wherever the Augustal priests had right of place; his effigy in ivory was to lead the procession at the Circus Games, and no flamen or augur, unless of the Julian house, was to be created in his room. Arches were added, at Rome, on the Rhine bank, and on the Syrian mountain of Amanus, with an inscription recording his achievements and the fact that he had died for his country. There was to be a sepulchre in Antioch, where he had been cremated; a funeral monument in Epidaphne, the suburb in which he had breathed his last. His statues, and the localities in which his cult was to be practised, it would be difficult to enumerate. When it was proposed to give him a gold medallion, as remarkable for the size as for the material, among the portraits of the classic orators, Tiberius declared that he would dedicate one himself "of the customary type, and in keeping with the rest: for eloquence was not measured by fortune, and its distinction enough if he ranked with the old masters." The equestrian order renamed the so called "junior section" in p515their part of the theatre after Germanicus, and ruled that on the fifteenth of July the cavalcade should ride behind his portrait. Many of these compliments remain: others were discontinued immediately, or have lapsed with the years.

Book III

2 The Caesar had sent two cohorts of his Guard; with further orders that the magistrates of Calabria, Apulia, and Campania should render the last offices to the memory of his son. And so his ashes were borne on the shoulders of tribunes and centurions: before him the standards went unadorned, the Axes reversed; while, at every colony they passed, the commons in black and the knights in official purple burned raiment, perfumes, and other of the customary funeral tributes, in proportion to the resources of the district. Even the inhabitants of outlying towns met the procession, devoted their victims and altars to the departed spirit, and attested their grief with tears and cries. Drusus came up to Tarracina, with Germanicus' brother Claudius and the children who had been left in the capital. The consuls, Marcus Valerius and Marcus Aurelius (who had already begun their magistracy), the senate, and a considerable part of the people, filled the road, standing in scattered parties and weeping as they pleased: for of adulation there was none, since all men knew that Tiberius was with difficulty dissembling his joy at the death of Germanicus.

The trial and condemnation of Piso:

14 On all counts but one the defence wavered. There was no denying that he had tampered with the soldiery, that he had abandoned the provinces to the mercies of every villain, that he had even insulted the commander-in-chief. The single charge which he seemed to have dissipated was that of poisoning. It was, indeed, none too plausibly sustained by the accusers, who argued that, at a dinner given by Germanicus, Piso (who was seated above him) introduced the dose into his food. Certainly, it seemed folly to assume that he could have ventured the act among strange servants, under the eyes of so many bystanders, and in the presence of the victim himself: also, he offered

his own slaves for torture, and insisted on its application to the attendants at the meal. For one reason or other, however, the judges were inexorable: the Caesar, because war had been levied on a province; the senate, because it could never quite believe that Germanicus had perished without foul play. . . . A demand for the correspondence was rejected as firmly by Tiberius as by Piso. At the same time, shouts were heard: it was the people at the senate-doors, crying that, if he escaped the suffrages of the Fathers, they would take the law into their own hands. They had, in fact, dragged his effigies to the Gemonian Stairs, and were engaged in dismembering them, when they were rescued and replaced at the imperial command. He was therefore put in a litter and accompanied home by an officer of one of the praetorian cohorts; while rumour debated whether the escort was there for the preservation of his life or the enforcement of his death.

15 Plancina, equally hated, had more than equal influence; so that it was considered doubtful how far the sovereign would be allowed to proceed against her. She herself, so long as hope remained for Piso, protested that she would share his fortune for good or ill, or, if the need arose, would meet destruction in his company. But once her pardon had been procured by the private intercessions of Livia, she began step by step to dissociate herself from her husband and to treat her own defence as a distinct issue. It was a fatal symptom, and the defendant knew it. He was doubtful whether to make another effort or not; but, as his sons pressed him, he hardened his heart and entered the senate once more. He faced the repetition of the charges, the hostile cries of the Fathers, the fierce opposition evident in every quarter; but nothing daunted him more than the sight of Tiberius, pitiless and angerless, barred and bolted against the ingress of any human emotion. After being carried home, he wrote a little, apparently notes for his defence the next day; sealed the paper, and handed it to a freedman. Then he gave the usual attention to his person; and finally, late at night, when his wife had left the bedroom, he ordered the door to be closed, and was found at daybreak with his throat cut and a sword lying on the floor.

16 I remember hearing my elders speak of a document seen more than once in Piso's hands. The purport he himself never disclosed, but his friends always asserted that it contained a letter from Tiberius with his instructions in reference to Germanicus; and that, if he had not been tricked by the empty promises of Sejanus, he was resolved to produce it before the senate and to put the emperor upon his defence. His death, they believed, was not self-inflicted: an assassin had been let loose to do the work. I should hesitate to endorse either theory: at the same time, it was my duty not to suppress a version given by contemporaries who were still living in my early years.

18 . . . This closed the punitive measures demanded by Germanicus' death: an affair which, not only to the generation which witnessed it, but in the succeeding years, was a battle-ground of opposing rumours. So true it is that the great event is an obscure event: one school admits all hearsay evidence, whatever its character, as indisputable; another perverts the truth into its contrary; and, in each case, posterity magnifies the error. Drusus, who had left the capital, in order to regularize his command, entered it shortly afterwards with an ovation. A few days later, his mother Vipsania died — the only one of all Agrippa's children whose end was peace. The rest perished, part, it is known, by the sword, part, it was believed, by poison or starvation.