Untold Musings of an Overlooked Emperor

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Epic Threads

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Artist's Statement

This piece of creative writing was inspired, in part, by my renewed interest in analysing potential biases in historical sources. One of the most vital sources discussing Tiberius' life and role as *princeps* is from Tacitus' *Annales*, and, while he expressed desire to portray an unbiased account of the lives of Tiberius and his successors, Tiberius is portrayed in a particularly scathing light. I wished to explore the context of Tiberius' rule and attempt to illustrate my own thoughts on him, using both ancient and modern sources, with the intention to shine more light on a ruler who, despite not being as monumental as Augustus, held the trajectory set by his adoptive father for the future of Rome's political climate.

In choosing to write from the perspective of Tiberius himself, I sought to give a voice to a figure who was often overlooked, both in life by Augustus and in death through scholarship on the Julio-Claudians. Additionally, writing from this point of view allowed for a deeper, more introspective approach than an outside account would provide. His thoughts in this journal as he works through his feelings, and the circumstances around him 'writing' in the first place, are creative interpretations but are grounded in and extrapolated from historical and modern sources, aiming to provide a coherent narrative for the reader.

It is my hope – regardless of how convincing this work is to you – that you take something away from it; that the next time you see an historical source, you consider the context within which it was written and search for potential biases from the author.

EXCERPT

From the recently discovered private journal of Tiberius Caesar Augustus

I WRITE on these woeful Kalends[1] to quieten a turbulent mind. That I may reflect upon my life and my continuation of his divine will,[2] and that I may organize my thoughts on these matters. With the death of my most trusted advisor and leader of the praetorian guard,[3] one whose disloyal self-interest I did not foresee – could not have foreseen – I find myself further reclused from Rome. Withdrawn within my own estate, my own home, at the slight.[4] It is his treachery that holds culpability for the racket in my head. His untoward actions that stir up memories, making fresh the wounds from past faults. I feel I can no longer trust in the sanctity of confidence in another, given recent events; thus, I write for the sake of gaining clarity in my own thoughts, for all those around me have lost their credit.[5]

As Seianus is the one responsible for bringing about the darkening clouds over my mind, it seems fitting to first discuss events more current to the troubles I ruminate upon. However, I believe it necessary to begin with how I came to the point where I appointed him in the first place. There are many factors which led me to the decision I made, but trust appears to be common amongst all; the hesitant trust my divine father granted me in his final years, the lack of trust among the Senate in me, and the ever-wavering trust in myself all had roles to play in my appointment of him.[6]

Throughout the mortal life of Divus Augustus, while I was treated like a son by him – having even been led by him to the forum to receive my *toga virilis*[7] – I was never the first choice for succession.[8] Marcellus, Agrippa, Caius and Lucius, and even my nephew were sought before me.[9] When placed next to a monumentally charismatic man such as he, I understand why I was oft overlooked. Agrippa had helped my divine father time and time again during the more chaotic early years of his rise to power,[10] and Marcellus was the son my father never had.[11] I could see a shift in desire for a blood successor when he appointed the young Caius and Lucius,[12] and when he urged me to divorce Vipsania and to marry Julia – his only issue.[13]

And even though I had an adult son of my own, he insisted upon my adoption of Germanicus.[14] As such, I was never given that same urgency to build up my presence within the Senate, despite being offered many an opportunity to do so.[15] I much preferred the study of rhetoric over the practice,[16] and I found peace when in exile on Rhodes[17] – free from the cares of the development of imperial skills – despite

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[1]Likely the first of November, 31 CE.
[2]He is meaning Augustus, here.
[3]That is, the death of Seianus by means of execution: Levick, 86.
[4]He never returned to Rome. Levick, 180.
[5]Tiberius, with trust in others freshly wounded by the culmination of events with Seianus in Rome, decides that he is only able to confide in writing what others would confide in another. This thus limits the extent to which he could gain insight to his own knowledge and skillset.
[6]A combination of the factors above appears to be a likely reason for why Seianus became so trusted by Tiberius. This will be explored in the following paragraphs.
[7]Edwards, 3.
[8]Galinsky, "Augustus at Home: Friends and Family," 129.
[9]Levick, 9, 12, 16, 33–34.
[10]Galinsky, 115, 117–122.
[11]Levick, 9.
[12]Levick, 16.
[13]Levick, 18.
[14]Levick, 33–34.
[15]Levick, 22–23. Tiberius likely did not experience as much of a need to cement himself politically due to him not being the first choice to succeed Augustus until much later.
[16]Levick, 5–7.
[17]Tacitus' *Annals* portrays this exile as full of "wrath, hypocrisy, and secret sensuality." Despite Tacitus' promise *sine ira et studio*, his analysis of Tiberius may have been coloured by the perspectives on this dynasty when he was raised, having been born during Nero's rule.

having enjoyed the responsibilities held during my time campaigning and the military successes brought with it.[18]

All that is not to say that I held no respect among the Senate. The powers I accumulated over the final years before the death of my divine father and the vast successes of my own military career were sufficient in preventing the fall into another civil war.[19] Despite this, the Senate – during the earlier years of my succession, especially – would critique all that I did, even as I acted to further the wishes of my predecessor.[20] Having grown up and lived under his command, I was well aware of his desires for the people and the betterment of Rome. Alas, comparisons not only occurred with my supposed shortcomings, but with successes as well.[21] I proved time and time again that the will of the Divine Augustus and my own will were one and the same,[22] but I did not hold the same presence,[23] nor was I Augustus myself, so I grew to be distrusted, never being appreciated for who I was.[24]

But as I fostered the era of peace that had begun under my divine father, and as I continued to perpetuate his will and nurture his divine cult, these complaints seemingly grew fewer and further between.[25] I felt as though I had begun to truly inherit the powers cultivated and collected by him, though I would never outshine his brilliance.[26] It was with these lessened comparisons that I was able to attempt to leave my own mark on all of Rome, taking the will of Augustus and administering alterations to better fit the needs of the citizens,[27] using the divine house as justification for these deviations.[28]

Despite this, the Senate still refused to fully trust in my authority. The Senate never appeared able to understand that which I wanted for them.[29] Senators would expect of me to influence in the manner of my divine father, then would criticize when I exerted this influence. When I allowed them more freedom, they became more servile, and when I restricted these freedoms, they grew more vocal in their complaints.[30]

While I grew to understand the immense weight of the responsibility that had been placed on my divine father's shoulders,[31] I never possessed the same level of confidence as he. There have been times, thus, where I could come close to imitating that presence, but my constant battle between myself and the Senate ensured this was not always the truth. I had not needed to fight for my authority as Augustus did.[32] Rather, I was guided into it, when I no longer was overlooked by him.[33] Despite his guidance, my

[18] Levick, 29; Galinsky, 127–128, 130–131. Tiberius appeared to enjoy responsibilities, even if handed to him out of a sense of duty, as with his campaigns under Augustus. However, it is likely that he was able to recognize why Augustus sidelined him, even if he might not have appreciated the treatment.

[19] Ferray, 125–129.

[20] Levick, 60.

[21] Levick, 69.

[22] Edwards, 4–5.

[23] Tacitus, *Annals*, "Book I"; Hurlet, "The Principle Enshrined."

[24] Tiberius was likely compared heavily to Augustus in his early reign, as this was a new political climate for the Romans.

[25] Hurlet, "The Principle Enshrined."

[26] Hurlet, "The Principle Enshrined."

[27] Edwards, 208–209.

[28] Edwards, 67.

[29] Due to intrinsic differences between him and Augustus, the Senate did not know how to proceed in the treatment and deference to Tiberius. It is possible that because of their differences in presence (even if less than they appear), senators became aware of how the "restored republic" under Augustus was a façade but were unable to function without this dynastic influence.

[30] Tacitus, *Annals*, "Book I." Tiberius likely had to experiment with his influence to ensure stability so, while the overall trend is that he "surrendered" power to the Senate, it would not be too forward to assume he moved only in the direction of giving them more power.

[31] Tiberius likely understood the responsibilities of maintaining an empire through observing Augustus and through sharing in his imperial status. However, experiencing this weight under the watchful eye of another likely felt less oppressive than experiencing it alone.

[32] Edwards, 4–5.

[33] Levick, 22–23.

confidence in politics remained the same.[34] Having been awarded the cognomen Augustus in my divine father's will helped assert my standing,[35] but I did not desire to inherit all of his titles, as I held doubts regarding my own abilities.[36] And it appeared easier to me for the people to accept a leader who worked for their honours, than one who assumed full transfer of power inflating their image with false honours.[37]

It is with this understanding of myself and my divine father amid increasing frustrations within the Senate, that I chose to depart from Rome once more.[38] I have grown tired of the constant troubles presented by the Senate and decided it best to distance myself from proceedings. Allowing myself to acknowledge that I am not Augustus, and that I should instruct how I wish[39] – that is, from a distance – has relieved much of that inherited burden. With my absence, the weight of authority over the people of Rome has become more fairly balanced;[40] distributed nearly as in times before.[41] However, it is this separation from Rome which brings me to where I am now, in my Capri estate, in unprecedented solitude.[42]

Over the past few years, I had fallen into a comfortable rhythm. Seianus had been responsible for handling correspondence between myself and Rome, and I had trusted him enough to succeed in this assignment.[43] I had found an ideal sense of stability under this arrangement, and I had thought little about the effects this situation would have on both myself and Rome as a whole.[44] The treacherous acts of Seianus have caused me much grief and I detest not having realized sooner his scheme.[45] It is through the aftermath of his ambitious self-interest that I have lost all desire to conduct affairs with the Senate;[46] cleaning up the chaos left in his wake having sapped all political energy from my spirit. This is but the start of what shall be a long process to undo the vast, negative impacts of his influence, but I know that I shall never have the same relationship with the Senate as I held prior to my departure from Rome.[47] I grow tired of public affairs, but I must rectify my errs. Then might I finally be able to focus my attentions elsewhere.

While I no longer trust myself to find comfort in confiding in others, due to recent events, choosing to record my thoughts here provides me with a similar sense. I have quelled the waters of a tempestuous mind, albeit temporarily. For there will always arise some other qualm, some other scourge or pestilence on the mind to hinder productivity, and the fulfilment and enjoyment of one's life. Regardless, I hope that Fate shall guide my return to the page later, rather than sooner.[48]

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[34]With Tiberius' status as the "second choice" for succession under most of Augustus' rule, Tiberius had less incentive to cultivate his public persona than Augustus' intended successors. It is possible that, in hindsight, Tiberius may have felt a bit of regret over not having spent as much time in preparation for the possibility of succeeding Augustus.

[35]Edwards, 16.

[36]Tacitus, *Annals*, "Book I." Tiberius' outright rejection of some of Augustus' many titles that had yet to pass down to him might have occurred in an attempt to appear humbler, or as the result of feelings of inadequacy or ill-preparedness for the role. However, this assertion of less authority appears to have served for an easier transition.

[37]It is possible that Tiberius had considered what might have happened, had he assumed all of Augustus' imperial titles and authority, and hypothesized that asserting himself as a new Augustus would have had worse outcomes than presenting himself as successor to Augustus.

[38]Levick, 87. Tiberius appears not to have taken to politics as Augustus had. He may have wished for a break from everything, but due to the responsibilities held by him, he had to compromise with a more distanced rule.

[39]Levick, 70.

[40]It could be that Tiberius may have wished for a restoration of the Senate, but it appears more probable that he desired less burden be placed on himself.

[41]Nearly like the Republic.

[42]Tiberius is not without his usual array of guards and servants.

[43]Levick, 127.

[44]Levick, 69. It is possible that the reason for Tacitus' lack of material in this time is linked to the rule of Seianus in Rome, despite how he is portrayed.

[45]It seems probable that Tiberius would have some sort of feelings regarding the betrayal and later execution of someone in whom he held such a great degree of trust.

[46]With the death of the one in control of correspondence between Tiberius and Rome, and with trust broken between the Senate and Tiberius by giving a man like Seianus such power, it is possible that Tiberius wished to withdraw further from politics, given his history.

[47]Which was not a good relationship to begin with.

[48]Without an outlet for advice, Tiberius is limited by the bounds of his own knowledge.

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