



The Death of the Roman Republic?

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Abstract

Did the Roman republic die with Julius Caesar? With Cicero? With the gradual consolidation of power in the hands of Caesar's adoptive son, who would in 27 BCE receive from the Senate the additional honorific appellation 'Augustus'? By looking at how imperial rule preserved remnants and facades of republican language and institutions, this lecture will interrogate the ways in which a popular constitution can be undermined and gradually transmuted into a dictatorial one.

Introduction

'Caesar is the *res publica*' (Ovid, *Tristia* 4.4.15). Writing in exile around 10 CE, the poet Ovid was speaking of the Caesar who had been given the formal title of Augustus by the Senate in 27 BCE. That had followed a decisive victory over the forces of Mark Antony and Cleopatra at the Battle of Actium four years earlier (in 31 BCE). Prior to those events, we speak of Augustus as Octavian, the young man who came to prominence as the grandnephew and adopted heir of Julius Caesar, a member of the Second Triumvirate who ultimately emerged from its end as – well, as what? In 27 BCE he became Caesar Augustus, but what did that mean? How did Romans understand the succession of crises through which they lived, and the repeated remaking of their political arrangements? For how long could and did some of them see the ancient republican constitution as still lasting – and when and how did those more skeptical, both as political actors and as historians, see it as having died?

Now, in declaring that Caesar Augustus *was* the *res publica*, Ovid might seem to have anticipated Louis XIV's infamous declaration that 'L'état, c'est moi'. In fact, within the overall stanza, Ovid's point was more complex:

*'The Father of the Fatherland himself—and who is more civil
than him—tolerates being mentioned often in my verse,
nor can he prevent it, since Caesar is the res publica,
and a share of the common wealth is also mine'.¹*

¹ Ovid, *Tr.* 4.4.13-16, trans. Kline, modified Hodgson ('common wealth' is printed as two separate words in Hodgson's monograph: see A.S. Kline (trans.) 'Ovid: *Tristia* Book 4' Poetry in Translation (2003), available online at www.poetryintranslation.com; Louise Hodgson, *Res Publica and the Roman Republic: 'Without Body or Form'* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 274.

The scholar Louise Hodgson has argued that ‘Ovid [here] plays on the literal meaning of *res publica* as *res populi*: Augustus, assimilated to the *res publica*...becomes common property, and therefore to some extent is the poet’s property too’.² Thus the poet was cleverly claiming a share in the *res publica*, not ceding it entirely to Caesar.

This language game did not rescue Ovid from the exile to which Augustus had condemned him, where he died nine years later (in 17 CE). But it does show that assessing the status of the *res publica* under Caesar Augustus (and indeed after him) was already a complicated question for the Romans (and Greeks) who were living through those years.

Now Cicero, who was the subject of my lecture last week, never saw the age of Augustus in that guise: though he was both political actor and chronicler of multiple crises in Rome, up until his own death in 43 BCE at the orders of Mark Antony in conjunction with Octavian (who was not yet Augustus) and the third member of the Second Triumvirate. Yet Cicero’s final writings were an effort to insist that the norms of the republic were still valid, even addressing a treatise to his son to educate him in the duties of a Roman statesman as they had previously been understood. For that reason, his moralizing convictions (even though he had died for them) would be less appealing to early modern authors living through a parallel period of civil war than the writings of a later Roman historian, writing of the period from the death of Augustus onward and writing through the last of a line of destructive emperors into the relative relief of the start of a line of good ones.

This later historian was Cornelius Tacitus, an historian of the period from Augustus onward, who himself survived active political life in the late first century CE tyranny of Domitian before the relief of Nerva’s reign was reached. Tacitus fits into the timeline of Roman history thus:

CHRONOLOGY OF ROME: AUGUSTUS TO TACITUS

Drawing in part on Erskine (ed) *A Companion to Ancient History* (2009)

31 BCE Battle of Actium

27 BCE Octavian given title *Augustus* by Senate

14-69 Death of Augustus (14); then *Julio-Claudian Dynasty* (viewed as bad emperors)

14-37 Tiberius Emperor – 14 CE: beginning events of Tacitus’ *Annals* (14-68 CE)

37-41 Caligula Emperor

41-54 Claudius Emperor

54-68 Nero Emperor

c.55 Tacitus born

69-96 69: Year of four emperors after fall of Nero

69-96 *Flavian Dynasty*: Tacitus’ *Histories* cover this period [Domitian: 81-96]

96-192 *Nerva-Antonine Dynasty* (“Five Good Emperors,” including Trajan)

97-98 Tacitus consul (97, under Nerva); writes *Agricola & Germania* (98)

c.110-c.115 Tacitus proconsul in Asia (112-13); writes *Histories*, then *Annals*

c.117-130 Tacitus dies

And Tacitus’ work would have a dramatic impact on European political thought from just about the moment when Gresham College was founded in 1597: as Alexandra Gajda has noted of the seventeenth century, ‘Between 1600 and 1649 at least sixty-seven editions of [Tacitus’] *Annals* and *Histories* were printed’, along with many translations.³ To this wave of readers, Tacitus’ ironic insights into the dynamics of autocracy – into flattery, brutality, concealment, betrayal, hypocrisy – would offer a primer for how to survive tyranny; to others, for how to practice it. And today, as in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, many people are living through similar political crises, in which an old regime seems to be dying while another is in the process of being born: from the strains on postwar global institutions, to those subjected to violent conquest, to those fearing the death of meaningful democratic participation. Ours too may be an age for Tacitus.

It is useful to pause here for some terminological clarification: what we today call the Roman Republic ‘had’ an empire; that was different from the Roman Empire that is generally held by scholars to have begun with Augustus. To

² Hodgson, *Res Publica*, 274, adding (275) that ‘Ovid collapses all fine distinctions to conflate *res publica* and *princeps*, comparable to Cicero conflating Caesar with the *res publica* in his letter to Trebonius towards the end of 46 [citing Cic. *Fam.* 15.20.2]’.

³ Alexandra Gajda, ‘Tacitus and political thought in early modern Europe, c. 1530-c. 1640’, in A. J. Woodman, *The Cambridge Companion to Tacitus*, 253–68 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), at 253.

be sure, some scholars would say that the Republic was already dead from the moment of Julius Caesar's decisive (48 BCE) or final (45) victories in the civil war; or from 44, when he was appointed *dictator perpetuus* (dictator in perpetuity) by the Senate; or from the moment of his murder on the Ides of March of that year, after which there was never a real restoration of the normal functioning of the Republic (despite the continued functioning of the Senate and the election of consuls, tribunes and so on).

Still, the majority of scholars would say that the decisive transition from the Republic to the Empire happened under Augustus. But again, exactly when and how? It is all too easy to oversimplify this story. For example, the Encyclopedia Britannica's *Timeline of the Roman Republic* states that in 23 BCE:

'The Senate gives Augustus complete control, officially ending the Republic'.

If that were true, this lecture could simply end here: we would have a simple answer, an official date on which the Roman Republic died. But as I argued in my parallel Gresham Lecture inquiring into 'The Death of Athenian Democracy?',⁴ we miss the point if we look for a single date as the answer. The deeper question is how, over time, crises work to transform continuity into change. In the Roman case, the scholars Robert Morstein-Marx and Nathan Rosenstein have argued that:

*'... in an objective sense the Republic never actually "fell" – an over-worked metaphor that anyway prejudices the issue in various ways: by prompting us to look for a single, catastrophic event...
On the contrary, the res publica...was transformed incrementally and for the most part imperceptibly into the res publica over which Augustus presided as Princeps'.*⁵

Thus tonight, we will be exploring, first, how autocracy developed in Rome – analysing Augustus' regime by drawing on the modern idea of 'autocratic legalism'; second, how autocracy developed further under his successors from Tiberius to Nero – and how figures such as Seneca tried to live under it, drawing on the modern idea of 'exit, voice and loyalty'; and third, how Tacitus himself conveyed his moral and political analysis of Roman autocracy and its relationship to liberty and republicanism through the grammar, syntax and tone of his historical writing. And we can begin Part I with the word highlighted in the quotation above: by exploring what *princeps* meant as a path to understanding how Augustus related to the *res publica*. As we'll see, Augustus paired the claim to be *princeps* with a changing set of roles and powers within the Roman polity – giving rise to further candidate years to mark the decisive break between Republic and Empire, whereas again, I'll suggest that the deeper question is just what each successive crisis and transformation might mean.

I. Augustus

The 'earliest surviving use of *princeps* for Octavian/Augustus' is in Horace's *Odes* [*Carm.*] 1.2, lines 50-52:⁶

*...hic magnos potius triumphos,
hic ames dici pater atque princeps
neu sinas Medos equitare inultos
te duce, Caesar.*

'Here rather celebrate your triumphs.'

⁴ Melissa Lane, 'The Death of Athenian Democracy?' Gresham College Lecture, 28 May 2026: available at <https://www.gresham.ac.uk/watch-now/death-athenian-democracy>.

⁵ Robert Morstein-Marx and Nathan Rosenstein, 'The Transformation of the Republic', in Nathan Rosenstein and Robert Morstein-Marx (eds) *A Companion to the Roman Republic*, 625–37 (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), at 625-6. These scholars continue that 'Contemporary Romans do not appear to have distinguished terminologically between these phases in the life of their *res publica*' (626). They find only in Seneca (writing in the mid-first century CE) a 'reasonably clear conceptualization of the Principate as monarchy, and thus as a fundamental change of the political system from the traditional Republic' – and only in Tacitus (writing around the turn from the 1st to 2nd centuries CE) that the phrase *res publica* itself comes to 'unambiguously' signal what fell on the 'before' side of a divide between what we now label the 'Republic' and the 'Principate'. On Cicero and the *res publica*, see Melissa Lane, 'Cicero In and On Political Crises', Gresham College Lecture, 11 June 2026: available at <https://www.gresham.ac.uk/watch-now/cicero>

⁶ John Rich, 'Making the Emergency Permanent: *Auctoritas*, *Potestas* and the Evolution of the Principate of Augustus', in Yann Rivière (ed.) *Des réformes augustéennes*, *Collection de l'École Française de Rome* 458 (2012): 37–121, at 60.

*Here delight to be hailed as Father and Princeps
and do not allow the Medes to ride unavenged
while you, Caesar, are our leader*.⁷

The word *princeps* was an appellation for himself and his position that Augustus embraced: an appellation that was perhaps deliberately ambiguous and paradoxical. And while that term gives us the English word ‘prince’, that is misleading when we think about ancient Rome. The word simply meant ‘first’ in Latin, and it had the political sense of ‘first citizen’. That could simply mean a ‘leading citizen’, one among many or one enjoying special esteem: as Alison Cooley has observed, the term *princeps* had been widely used to refer to statesmen with leading role(s) in the state by Cicero, and was used by loyal authors writing under Augustus (such as Velleius Paterculus) sometimes to refer to figures other than Augustus as well.⁸

Even when *princeps* was used by or about Augustus himself, it was not the formal title of an office. Erich Gruen has pointed out that ‘Augustus never occupied a post called the Principate, nor did he exercise an office to which the title princeps was attached’.⁹ It was precisely because the term combined republican overtones (in its Ciceronian legacy) with a lack of claim to any new office, that Augustus may have embraced it as the apt – precisely because imprecise – way to capture the distinctive role(s) of pervasive influence that he came to exercise.¹⁰

Let’s look further into how Augustus’ role evolved. The scholar John Rich titled his study of Augustan politics with the haunting and prescient phrase, ‘Making the Emergency Permanent’. Having come to power through civil war, Augustus would eventually laud himself on establishing internal peace (*Pax Romana*) – and contemporaries as well as later authors would indicate how important the exhaustion of war had been in leading to the consolidation of his authority. Yet while the first phase of the emergency could be declared over, it transmuted into an ongoing justification for special powers, as Rich has argued, highlighting:

*‘A central feature in this evolution of his principate over the course of Augustus’ reign was the transformation of his provincial command, and its associated commitments to the maintenance of peace and care for the republic, from a limited-term emergency provision to a permanent and central feature of the structure of his regime’.*¹¹

In marking the end of the first emergency, while at the same time giving rise to a kind of permanent emergency, the constitutional framing of Augustus’ powers varied over time. Rich emphasizes that the Second Triumvirate ‘itself was justified as an emergency arrangement to fulfil specific purposes’, being put on a legal footing with powers for five years “‘to settle the republic’”, echoing the purpose of Sulla’s dictatorship.¹² While it is not clear just when and how the triumvirate was understood to end (despite the time period), Octavian ‘[f]rom 31...held the consulship in successive years’.¹³

⁷ Horace, *The Complete Odes and Epodes*, trans. David West (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). Rich, ‘Making the Emergency Permanent’, 40, notes that in Horace, *Carm.* 4.14.6, Horace refers to Augustus as ‘the greatest of the *principes*’ (*maxime principum*).

⁸ Alison E. Cooley, ‘From the Augustan Principate to the Invention of the Age of Augustus’, *The Journal of Roman Studies* 109 (November 2019): 71–87.

⁹ E. S. Gruen, ‘Augustus and the making of the Principate’, in K. Galinsky (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Augustus*, 33–51 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), at 34, quoted in Cooley, ‘From the Augustan Principate’, 73. On Cicero and the *res publica*, see Melissa Lane, ‘Cicero In and On Political Crises’, Gresham College Lecture, 11 June 2026: available at <https://www.gresham.ac.uk/watch-now/cicero>

¹⁰ Against taking *princeps* to have been a formally bestowed title, see J. A. Crook, ‘Augustus: power, authority, achievement’, in *The Cambridge Ancient History*, vol. X: The Augustan Empire, 43 B.C.–A.D. 69, 2nd edn, edited by Alan K. Bowman, Edward Champlin and Andrew Lintott, 113–46 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), at 119. To be sure, Tacitus would write retrospectively that ‘Augustus...brought a world exhausted from civil dissension under his authority, with the *nomen* of “First Citizen [*princeps*]” (*Annals* 1.1): while translators will sometimes (with justification) translate *nomen* as ‘title’, this does not necessarily mean that he received this as a formal title, but rather, that this was a way that he was addressed. Tacitus does at A. 3.56 does use *nomen* to refer to the formal titles of *rex* and *dictator*, which he says that Augustus (later in his career) avoided claiming by using the phrase ‘tribunician power’ as an ‘appellation’ instead; yet at A. 1.3, he refers to the continuing titles of magistrates with the term *vocabula* (words).

¹¹ Rich, ‘Making the Emergency Permanent’, 87–88.

¹² Rich, ‘Making the Emergency Permanent’, quoting from 42, 42 (citing various inscriptions and coins).

¹³ Rich, ‘Making the Emergency Permanent’, quoting from 47.

Of course, holding the consulship (or any office) for successive years was a breach of traditional republican norms, though Sulla and Julius Caesar had already muddied those waters. Nevertheless, Octavian in his early years in sole power sought to maintain and even restore some aspects of the life of the republic that had been interrupted by the various civil wars of the first century BCE to that point: holding a census (while using this to purge the Senate); renovating temples; instituting new games.¹⁴ The contemporary historian Velleius Paterculus would celebrate him for having ‘brought back’ the ‘pristine and ancient form of the republic’ (the whole phrase ran: *prisca illa et antiqua rei publicae forma reuocata*)¹⁵ – though Tacitus would later ask wistfully, already from early in Augustus’ reign, ‘*quotus quisque reliquus qui rem publicam vidisset?*’ or in the emphatic translation of Church and Brodribb, ‘How few were left who had seen the republic!’¹⁶

Two constitutional turning points under Augustus stand out. According to Augustus’ own late writing, the *Res Gestae Divi Augustus* (the *Deeds Accomplished by the Divinized Augustus*, a work intended to furnish the basis for posthumous inscriptions), the key turning point was 28/27 BCE. He described himself in that moment as having put an end to his direct control of the republic (necessary because of the civil war emergency) in favour of transferring control back to the senate and the people. Augustus was thus claiming to have settled the affairs of the state, and thereby to be stepping back into an ‘ancient’ form of collegial officeholding:

‘In my sixth and seventh consulships, when I had extinguished the flames of civil war, after receiving by universal consent the absolute control of affairs, I transferred the republic from my own control to the will of the senate and the Roman people. For this service on my part I was given the title of Augustus by decree of the senate, and the doorposts of my house were covered with laurels by public act, and a civic crown was fixed above my door, and a golden shield was placed in the Curia Julia whose inscription testified that the senate and the Roman people gave me this in recognition of my valour, my clemency, my justice, and my piety. After that time I excelled all in authority [auctoritas], but of power [potestas] I possessed no more than those who were my colleagues in any magistracy’ (trans. Shipley 1942, with modification from Rich).¹⁷

The distinction between *auctoritas* and *potestas* was itself a multifaceted staple of the ‘ancient form of the republic’. In Polybius’ analysis of the Roman constitution, *auctoritas* had belonged above all to the Senate: its role was to exercise a kind of moral-cum-political influence and suasion born of the claim to be respected.¹⁸ It extended to the *principes* who from time to time emerged as enjoying special standing within the Senate and so within Roman politics more broadly (such as Cato and Cicero).¹⁹ So here we can put the appellation of *princeps* and the claim to *auctoritas* together: Augustus claimed to have stepped back at this juncture, from the emergency quelling of civil war, into a more traditional (if not perfectly traditional) republican role.

¹⁴ Rich, ‘Making the Emergency Permanent’, 48-9.

¹⁵ Vell. 2.89.3-4, as quoted in Rich, ‘Making the Emergency Permanent’, 49.

¹⁶ Tacitus, *Complete Works of Tacitus*, trans. Alfred John Church, William Jackson Brodribb, and Sara Bryant, edited for Perseus (New York: Random House, 1942). By contrast, Yardley translates ‘only a minute fraction...had witnessed the republic’: see Cornelius Tacitus, *The Annals: The Reigns of Tiberius, Claudius, and Nero*, ed. Anthony A. Barrett, trans. J.C. Yardley (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), on which translations of the *Annals* below are based unless otherwise noted.

¹⁷ Aug. *RGDA* 34.1-3, trans. Shipley 1942; also quoted and translated (slightly differently) in Rich, ‘Making the Emergency Permanent’, 39-40: I have replaced Shipley’s ‘took precedence of all in rank’ with Rich’s ‘excelled all in authority’. See Shipley’s editorial comment on this passage at 399: ‘In these and the following years he gradually divested himself of his extraordinary powers and contented himself with ordinary offices, but held in an extraordinary way, such as the *tribunicia potestas*, and the *imperium*. In form he restored the republic; in substance the real power rested with him, perhaps, in view of the circumstances, unavoidably. The statement which he makes here is clearly the one which he wishes to be the view of posterity. At any rate, the revolutionary and extraordinary acts of the triumviral period ceased, by his own edict (Dio, liii. 2), with the expiration of 28 b.c.’.

¹⁸ On Polybius, see Melissa Lane, ‘From Plato to Polybius on Constitutional Change’, Gresham College Lecture, 28 May 2026: <https://www.gresham.ac.uk/watch-now/plato-polybius>.

¹⁹ Note however that the title of *princeps senatus* which was bestowed on Augustus ‘for life in 29 or 28 BC’ was different from the more general standing as *princeps* in the state: see Rich, ‘Making the Emergency Permanent’, 38, n.5 with references.

And some modern scholars are inclined to accept this claim. David Stockton, for example, contends that ‘the settlement of 28/7...ensured [Augustus’] supremacy with the minimum formal disturbance of constitutional mores’.²⁰ The key to putting an end to political upheaval was a move that I too would acknowledge as central to republican officeholding:

*‘[b]y the mere act of defining his powers, Augustus necessarily delimited them’.*²¹

And while Augustus himself never claimed in so many words to have ‘restored’ the republic, similar ideas are found in material culture and in official acts of the time. The Senate would later order an inscription (now lost) which has been attributed by some scholars to the so-called Arch of Augustus, reading as follows (in the proposed restoration), describing the *res publica* as ‘having been conserved’ by Augustus in the course of his sixth consulship.²² And the anonymously composed *Laudatio Turiae*, ‘an epitaph composed by an unknown man for his deceased wife’ sometime in the early Common Era, includes the lines: ‘*pacato orbe terrarum, res[stitut]a re publica* (Col. 2, lines 25-6: ‘the world having been made more peaceful, the *res publica* having been restored’.²³

Thus it was not, and is not, wholly quixotic to view Augustus’ achievements – and perhaps especially the constitution of 28/27 – as a reinstatement of crucial elements of the ancient republican constitution. But the situation would change again in the aftermath of a conspiracy against Augustus in 23 BCE. While that was put down, it led to further major constitutional changes – which were significant, even though I do not hold with the Britannica’s categorical assertion that this year marked the absolute end of the Republic.

What happened in 23 BCE was twofold. First, Augustus gave up holding the consulship – yet instead of claiming another office, he relied on the power of the tribunate (*tribunicia potestas*) being his for life, without actually occupying that position by name;²⁴ second, he claimed a proconsulship (meaning the governorship of an overseas province) and insisted on being named officially ‘greater’ than all the other proconsuls.²⁵

David Stockton argues that this amounted to a ‘far less republican’ set of political arrangements. Augustus would on these terms be:

*‘No tribune, but armed with the immense powers of that office, and armed for life. No consul, but furnished with selected consular prerogatives of central importance. No dictator, but with all provincial governors everywhere subordinated to his over-riding authority if and when he saw fit to use it’.*²⁶

²⁰ Stockton, ‘Primus and Murena’, 29-30.

²¹ Stockton, ‘Primus and Murena’, 30.

²² Rodolfo Amedeo Lanciani, *Storia degli scavi di Roma: e notizie intorno le collezioni Romane di antichità*, Vol. II. (Roma, E. Loeschler & Co., 1902), 200–202 attributes the inscription CIL VI.873 to this arch, providing the following reading: *Senatus Populusque Romanus Imp. Caesaris Divi Iuli f(ilio), consuli quinct(o), con(s)uli des(ignato) sect(o), imp(eratori) sept(imo), re publica conservata* (translation in text above by Alexa White), both of which he dates to 29 B.C.E., the same year as his Alexandrian triumph after the Battle of Actium (Lanciani, *Storia Degli Scavi di Roma*, 200).

²³ Rich, ‘Making the Emergency Permanent’, 107 n.6, referring to ILS 8393 = CIL 6.1527 = 41062. Rich comments further, 107: ‘This...is the only ancient source which certainly speaks of Octavian/Augustus as having restored the *res publica*’.

²⁴ W.K. Lacey, ‘Augustus and the Senate: 23 B.C.’, *Antichthon* (Sydney, Australia) 19 (1985): 57–67, at 66 and *passim*, argues that Augustus was claiming already to have possessed tribunician power, while (as Cassius Dio reports) declining the ‘name (*onoma*)’ of tribune when it was offered him by the Senate at this juncture.

²⁵ David Stockton, ‘Primus and Murena’, *Historia: Zeitschrift Für Alte Geschichte* 14, no. 1 (1965): 18–40, at 28. Stockton expands on this in a previous sentence (also on 28): ‘In 23 Augustus surrendered the consulship which he had held every year since 31. Instead of the consulship, he took the *tribunicia potestas*, and he took it for life...’ as well as also becoming a proconsul (the governor of a province) with an ‘*imperium*...explicitly characterized as *maius* in relation to all other provincial governors’.

²⁶ Stockton, ‘Primus and Murena’, 30. Jed Atkins, *Roman Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 29, adds that Augustus ‘perhaps also, in 19 BCE, [was granted] consular power for life’ (as per Cassius Dio 54.10.5).

Lifelong powers in particular were the antithesis of the ancient republic. After all, the key move in replacing the monarchy by the republic back in 509 BCE had been effected with the institution of one-year terms for the consuls.²⁷

Yet even more significant is the final paradox that Stockton highlights:

*'all these powers...[were] not assumed in virtue of auctoritas or by default, but explicitly granted by due legal process'.*²⁸

In ensuring that each phase of his rule was legally established, Augustus embodied an ancient version of my Princeton colleague Kim Scheppelle's analysis of today's 'autocratic legalism':

*'the autocrats who hijack constitutions seek to benefit from the superficial appearance of both democracy and legality within their states...Because these autocrats...use constitutional or legal methods to accomplish their aims, they can hide their autocratic designs in...legitimate legal forms'.*²⁹

Scheppelle's concept makes clear that a narrow claim to legality alone is no salvation. The mere form of legality cannot guarantee the freedom that we value the rule of law for promising to provide.

II. The Julio-Claudian Dynasty: Tiberius to Nero

Augustus' successors would take the idea of autocratic legalism further. They made still more modifications to key 'ancient' republican institutions. Already under Augustus, the Senate was 'permanently deprived of certain major functions': Richard Talbert writes that the 'crowning blow fell in 13', when a *consilium* was established which arrogated real power to this small committee.³⁰ And while Tiberius changed that, it was early in his own reign that (as Talbert has further noted) 'elections were transferred entirely to the Senate' even though 'as late as the early 3rd century assemblies still continued to meet for the purpose...' of ratification of electoral decisions.³¹

Another significant development was the continued privatisation of the public realm. In the *Res Gestae* (secs.15ff.), Augustus himself refers to gifts of money and grain from his own patrimony and from state funds to the plebs, and to building public works at his own expense. Nero would tip the balance entirely on the side of privatization of state assets. As Tacitus would later record (*A.* 15.37), Nero began 'to treat the entire city as his own house'.

In quoting Tacitus, I am beginning to highlight his judgment as an historian.³² Before turning to consider Tacitus as an author in Part III, we can begin to get a sense of his take on Roman history by viewing the period from Augustus to Nero through his eyes. Describing the atmosphere early in what would become known as the Common Era (with 4 CE as a *terminus ante quem*), Tacitus insists that:

'Thus the nature of the state was changed, and no trace of the old integrity of character was anywhere to be found. Equality had been discarded, and everybody focused on the emperor's commands'.
(*A.* 1.4)

And referring back to the settlement of 27 BCE, we see the bite of Tacitus' mordant syntax:

²⁷ See Melissa Lane, *Of Rule and Office: Plato's Ideas of the Political* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023; paperback edn with modifications, 2025), 3, for a similar transition from kings to *archontes* in Athens, as described by Pausanias (4.5.10).

²⁸ Stockton, 'Primus and Murena', 30. Atkins, *Roman Political Thought*, 29, adds that Augustus 'perhaps also, in 19 BCE, [was granted] consular power for life' (as per Cassius Dio 54.10.5).

²⁹ Kim L. Scheppelle, 'Autocratic Legalism', *University of Chicago Law Review* 85 (2018) no. 2: 545–584, <https://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/uclrev/vol85/iss2/2>, at 547–48.

³⁰ Richard Talbert, *The Senate of Imperial Rome* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 488, drawing on Tac. *Ann.* 1.1.2.

³¹ Talbert, *Senate of Imperial Rome*, 342, adding that there was a temporary reversal under Gaius (i.e. Caligula), but the Senate undermined it, drawing on Suetonius (*Calig.* 16) and Cassius Dio 59.9.6–7.

³² Tacitus titled his work *Ab excessu divi Augusti* (from the death/departure of the god/divinized Augustus), which modern scholars have divided into two works by allocating the various books of a sequential narrative to the *Annals* [*A.*] and the *Histories* [*H.*] respectively.

'Finally, in his sixth consulate, Caesar Augustus, secure in his power, annulled all the measures of his triumvirate and produced legislation to ensure us peace and an emperor (principe).³³ Then the shackles grew tighter'. (A. 3.28)

And upon the death of Augustus and the ascension of Tiberius, Tacitus writes:

'The first criminal act of the new principate [Tiberius] was the murder of Postumus Agrippa'. (A. 1.6)

'At Rome...they all rushed into servitude—consuls, senators, and knights. The higher the rank, the greater the hypocrisy and haste'. (A. 1.7)

'In fact, Tiberius used the consuls to initiate every action [after death of Augustus], as though he were acting under the old republic (vetere re publica) and in two minds about taking power'. (A. 1.7)

'Nevertheless', even upon the ascension of Nero, Tacitus acknowledged that 'there still remained some semblance of the republic' (A. 13.28). But it soon becomes evident that in his view this was a mere semblance. Tacitus describes what we may call the 'political culture'³⁴ under Nero with pointed irony:

'Whenever they were authorized to express an opinion, the senators were allowed to say what they wished...'. (A. 13.49)

The eventual total degradation of political life under Nero is illustrated by the tragic career of Lucius Annaeus Seneca (Seneca the Younger). Having acted as Nero's tutor, Seneca famously or infamously welcomed his assumption of power by offering him what he described as a 'mirror for princes' in the work *De Clementia (On Mercy)*, written Dec. 55-56 CE:

'I have undertaken to write on mercy, Nero Caesar, in order to act as a kind of mirror, showing you to yourself on the point as you are of attaining the greatest of pleasures'. (Sen. Clem. 1.1.1)³⁵

'I would rather offend you with the truth than please you with flattery'. (Sen. Clem. 2.2.2)

Yet Nero's gross moral deterioration would foster Seneca's growing aversion to political life. He remarked in a letter that (unlike Cicero) he preferred to keep away from elections (*Ep.* 118.2). And he ultimately noted the pointlessness of trying to contribute to a corrupt political regime:

'if the public realm is too corrupt to be helped, if it has been taken over by the wicked, the wise man will not struggle pointlessly nor squander himself to no avail' (Sen. De Otio 3.3).³⁶

The social theorist Albert O. Hirschman offers us a set of categories – exit, voice and loyalty – that are useful in understanding Seneca's shifting self-understanding.³⁷ Seneca would largely give up on the possibilities of immediate political 'voice' at the imperial court, redefining his ultimate 'loyalty' as not the political commonwealth but the commonwealth of the cosmos in which all wise humans were full members alongside the gods. In one letter he

³³ This is made into a new paragraph in the Yardley English translation, but the Latin syntax is continuous.

³⁴ I refer here to a remark by Amy Russell about 'political culture': 'The autocrat Augustus could more or less correctly claim that the magistracies and other institutions of the Republic survived under his rule, but that they all deferred to his informal influence. The change must be located in political culture, the ways in which those institutions operated and were understood', in Amy Russell, 'Consensus Breakdown: Or, How Cicero Was Wrong About Rome, and We Might Be Wrong About America', in Frederik Juliaan Vervaeke, David Rafferty and Christopher J. Dart (eds) *How Republics Die: Creeping Authoritarianism in Ancient Rome and Beyond*, 39–68 (Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, 2025), at 43.

³⁵ All quotations of *On Mercy [De Clementia]* are from Lucius Annaeus Seneca, *Moral and Political Essays*, ed. and trans. by John M. Cooper and J. F. Procopé (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

³⁶ Lucius Annaeus Seneca, *On the Private Life [De Otio]*, in *Moral and Political Essays*, ed. and trans. by John M. Cooper and J. F. Procopé, 172–180 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

³⁷ Using the categories of Albert O. Hirschman, *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970).

described himself as writing as ‘a citizen and soldier of the cosmos’ (*Ep.* 120.12). Thus we can also see him as embracing a kind of ‘exit’ from politics into a form of inner exile, ‘exiting’ from active political engagement to a new domain of philosophical voice and cosmopolitan loyalty.

Tacitus for his part wrote a generation later in admiration of Seneca, describing him (*A.* 13.2.1) as having been characterized by *honesta comitas* (‘honorable courtesy’, or as Ronald Syme unpacks the phrase, ‘union of moral strength with social tact’).³⁸ Yet as the later historian showed, such qualities did not protect Seneca in the end. In Tacitus’ words:

‘Nero asked Silvanus whether Seneca intended to commit suicide. The tribune then asserted that he had recognized no signs of apprehension, and no distress in his language or expression. He was therefore told to go back and deliver the death sentence’ – upon receipt of which, Seneca complied. (*A.* 15.61)

III. Living and Writing under Autocracy: Tacitus as author

Tacitus’ dry prose about Seneca’s death, and his irony about Tiberius, Nero and others, were part of his own techniques for surviving – and writing under – autocracy. Tacitus himself had held high public office under the ‘bad’ emperor Domitian, as praetor and priest; and then as suffect consul (97) under the first of the ‘Five Good Emperors’ (Nerva), and proconsul for Asia (112–113) under the second ‘Good Emperor’ (Trajan). He wrote his major historical works all in the relative relief of the ‘Good Emperors’, describing Nerva as making this possible by having ‘harmonized the old discord of autocracy and freedom [*principatem ac libertatem*]...’ (*Tac. Agr.* 3).³⁹ Even under a good emperor, freedom went hand in hand with the rule of a *princeps*. And meanwhile, Tacitus preserved the acute memory of what it had meant for him and his fellows to have lived through the bad ones. In this third and final main part of the lecture, I turn to a fuller exploration of just how Tacitus as author navigated the challenges of living and writing under autocracy.

The form of his writing maintained a continuity with the republican past. Just as Livy and other historians of the early Republic had done, Tacitus continued to use the traditional republican form of annalistic dating (i.e. dating each year by the names of its two elected consuls). Yet doing so to chronicle the Principate was a deliberately ironic choice: as Miriam Griffin observed, ‘Tacitus’ emphasis on the magisterial year is in fact part of his way of revealing the hypocrisy of Tiberius’.⁴⁰

Even as Tacitus maintained that republican form of historical writing, however, he was acutely aware that he was writing in a very different age. As A. M. Gowing has noted, Tacitus in the *Historiae* would contrast historians writing during the Republic who ‘enjoyed *libertas* to write what they wished’ (*H.* 1.1.1) with those writing under the Principate ‘whose *libertas* was merely illusory’ (*H.* 1.1.2).⁴¹ That had remained the case to a considerable extent even under the ‘Good Emperors’: autocracy was still autocracy, though the dynamics of domination and the possibilities of action did fluctuate with each particular emperor’s choice of ends and means.

In that context, Tacitus’ most famous commitment as an historian deserves special attention. This is his claim to write ‘without rancour or bias [*sine ira et studio*]’ (*A.* 1.2) – a phrase that I like to gloss as ‘without anger or agenda’. This might seem a simple declaration of objectivity as an historian. But in context, the claim to objectivity was an embattled one, as the objectivity of historians (and other authors and speakers) is precisely something that autocrats will typically seek to undermine: demanding that they curb their tongues or use them only to flatter or promote approved propaganda.⁴² Tacitus was manifestly hostile to censorship (as can be seen for example in *A.* 4.34–5).⁴³ In an

³⁸ Ronald Syme, *Tacitus*, 2 vols. (1958), vol.2, 550.

³⁹ All translations of the *Agricola* are from Cornelius Tacitus, *The Agricola and The Germania*, trans. H. Mattingly and S.A. Handford (Penguin Books, 1970).

⁴⁰ Miriam T. Griffin, ‘Tacitus as a Historian’, in A. J. Woodman (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Tacitus*, 168–83 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 183.

⁴¹ A. M. Gowing, ‘From the Annalists to the Annales: Latin Historiography before Tacitus’, in A. J. Woodman (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Tacitus*, 17–30 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 21.

⁴² A. J. Woodman, ‘Introduction’, in A. J. Woodman (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Tacitus*, 1–14 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

⁴³ Noted in Gajda, ‘Tacitus and Political Thought’, 258.

age of autocracy, the ‘normal’ objectivity of historical inquiry – the ‘normal’ freedom of speech of academics – cannot be taken for granted.

Recalling the terrors of life under the bad emperor Domitian, Tacitus emphasized the self-censorship imposed by Domitian’s use of informers and, for those like himself in the imperial service, of intense scrutiny at all times. Notice the historian’s use of the first person plural (‘our’, ‘we’) in describing life in the year 93 CE:

‘It was distinctive to our torments under Domitian that we both watched and were watched: he noted down our every sigh and kept score as each of us turned pale, relying himself on that scowling ruddy visage with which he shielded himself from shame’. (Tac. Agr. 45)

And the historian had summed this up:

‘We have...left an impressive example of subservience. Just as Rome of old explored the limits of freedom, so have we plumbed the depths of slavery, robbed by informers even of the interchange of speech. We would have lost our memories as well as our tongues had it been as easy to forget as to be silent’. (Tac. Agr. 2)

Nevertheless, Tacitus insisted that it was possible – at least for an exceptional few – to live and serve with honour even under a bad emperor. His prime example was his father-in-law Agricola, who had risen in the political ranks under Domitian to the governorship of Britain, and then managed to avoid the worst consequences of Domitian’s envy on his return. True, Agricola did not go out in a blaze of glory as a resister – but in Tacitus’ eyes, the Stoic philosophers who had chosen to do so had merely made ‘a defiant and futile parade of freedom’ (Tac. Agr. 42). By contrast, Agricola’s life of political service proved ‘that even under bad emperors men can be great’ (Tac. Agr. 42).

Yet the proof offered by the case of Agricola was exceptional. Many more men had like Seneca been forced to death by a bad emperor, or driven to a defiant death like some of his Stoic peers, or simply silenced or sidelined by the constraints of living under autocracy. Tacitus’ ability to forge the prose techniques to expose the dynamics of tyranny was as exceptional in its way as Agricola had been in his – and again, made possible only by the eventual advent of some greater political breathing space. The painful truth is that once (and as) autocratic rule sets in, there will be fewer and fewer good choices to be had. This is what Montaigne learned from Tacitus, in a sentence written in the sixteenth century, that might have been written in our own: that Tacitus was the author ‘proper in a sick and troubled state, as ours is in the present age’.⁴⁴

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⁴⁴ Quoted in Gajda, ‘Tacitus and Political Thought’, 258, ascribing the citation to J. H. M. Salmon, ‘Cicero and Tacitus in sixteenth-century France’, *AHR* 85 (1980): 327.

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