

TACITUS

THE ANNALS  
OF IMPERIAL ROME

TRANSLATED WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY  
MICHAEL GRANT

2:K5  
3/1

CHINA SOCIAL SCIENCES PUBLISHING HOUSE  
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## TRANSLATOR'S INTRODUCTION



## I. THE LIFE AND WORKS OF TACITUS

THE powerful personality of Cornelius Tacitus has survived in his writings, but we know extremely little of his life or his origin. Indeed, we are not even sure whether the first of his three names was Publius or Gaius. His family probably came from the south of France or from northern Italy (Cisalpine Gaul). If so, Tacitus – like other leading Latin writers – may not have been of wholly Italian ancestry. But we have no conclusive evidence. His father *may* have been an imperial agent at Trier or at Cologne, and paymaster-general for the armies on the Rhine; but again we are not certain.

At all events, Tacitus was born in about A.D. 56 or 57 (when Nero was emperor),<sup>1</sup> and was a member of the provincial upper class who found new prospects of careers open to them under the imperial regime. He lived and worked until the end of the emperor Trajan's reign (A.D. 98–117), and probably for some years into the reign of Hadrian (117–138). Much of the official career of Tacitus as a senator took place in a time of unhappiness and even terror for high officials, the black years of Domitian (A.D. 81–96). But Tacitus survived to enjoy the highest metropolitan post, the consulship, in A.D. 97 (during the short reign of Nerva, 96–8), and the governorship of the great province of western Anatolia ('Asia') – the climax of a senator's career – some fifteen years later.

He had received a careful Roman education. In his day that meant, particularly, an elaborate series of exercises in different kinds of public speaking, studied in the remarkable detail which we learn about from the treatises of Cicero and Quintilian; for advocacy in the courts was traditionally the most respected civil career. As a young man, Tacitus evidently studied at Rome with the leading orators of the day. He himself became one of the best known speakers of his time, and a life-

1. A list of Roman emperors will be found at the end of the book.



long interest in oratory emerges clearly from his writings.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, one of them – if, as is highly probable, Tacitus is its author – deals explicitly with the subject. This is the *Dialogue on Orators*, in which four historical characters, two lawyers and two literary men, very interestingly discuss the claims of oratory against those of literature, and the reasons why eloquence had declined during the century and more that had elapsed since Cicero's death. One reason of course – as is pointed out – was that this sort of impassioned disputation had much less part to play under emperors than amid the clashes of the outgoing Republic.

The *Dialogue* is dedicated to a consul of A.D. 102, and is likely to have been published then or soon after. Meanwhile, however, Tacitus had already begun to make it clear to the world that, even if oratory could never achieve its past glories again, the same was by no means true of history. The monographs with which he initiated his career as historian, the *Agricola* and *Germania*, were published within a short time of one another in c. A.D. 98. The *Agricola* to some extent recalls a familiar Greek tradition – that of the semi-biographical, moral eulogy of a personage;<sup>2</sup> here the personage is his own father-in-law. But Tacitus, giving the work an original structure of its own, inserts history and includes descriptive material about Britain. The *Germania* is an ethnographical study of Central Europe. Its purpose is not completely understood. But it does seem to contain recurrent moral contrasts, or implied contrasts, between the decadence of Rome and the crude vigour of the teeming, and potentially threatening, peoples beyond the Rhine. And indeed, eventually, these Germanic peoples played a large part in the eclipse of the Roman Empire in the West. But that was not until many years later.

Next followed Tacitus' two principal historical works. They told the story of the Roman emperors from A.D. 14 to 96. The *Histories*, which cover the later part of this epoch (from the death of Nero in A.D. 68), were written first. We have about a third of them, describing the terrible civil wars with which the period began.<sup>3</sup> Tacitus' last and

1. For the special relation between Roman oratory and history, see also below, p. 12.

2. This type of literature goes back at least as far as the *Evagoras* of Isocrates and the *Agésilas* of Xenophon in the fourth century B.C.

3. For English translations of Tacitus' works see p. 437.

greatest creation was his *Annals*, translated in this book. The *Annals* tell of the Julio-Claudian emperors from just before the death of Augustus (A.D. 14) to the death of Nero. That is to say, they deal with the reigns of Tiberius, Gaius (Caligula), Claudius, and Nero. Not everything has survived; we lack more than two years of Tiberius, the whole of the short reign of Gaius, half of the reign of Claudius, and the last two years of Nero. We have lost some of the highlights. But we have kept forty years out of fifty-four; by far the greater part of the *Annals* has come down to us.

The period with which they deal is still of infinite significance. For the first and last time in world history, the entire Mediterranean region belonged to the same unit. The Roman Republic had begun to acquire overseas territories in the third century B.C. From its first two Punic Wars against Semitic Carthage (264–201) Rome had emerged as the strongest Mediterranean power; and it spent the next 150 years extending its dominion in Europe, Asia, and Africa. The other great empire of the world at this time, China of the Han dynasty, was too far away for any rivalry to occur. Besides, they were separated – and, later, for commercial reasons, jealously separated – by Parthia. That loose feudal empire, stretching from the Euphrates to the Hindu Kush, receives frequent attention in the pages of Tacitus. For its rulers were the only foreign monarchs with whom Rome had to compete on anything like equal terms; and Rome had received a shock when its armies were heavily defeated by Parthian cavalry at Carrhae (Haran) in 53 B.C.

But this was only one of many problems in the century preceding the period considered by Tacitus. It had already, in that last century before our era, become clear that in various ways Rome's small-town Republican constitution was – for all its famous 'balance' between the classes, stressed by the Greek historian Polybius – unfitted for imperial responsibilities. The solution which imposed itself was the autocracy of the dictators Sulla (81–79 B.C.) and Julius Caesar (48–44 B.C.). This autocracy was stabilized by Augustus, forcibly but with decorous façade, as the Principate; and his Roman peace and reorganization enormously increased the prosperity of his vast realms. The present book begins at the end of his long life, and tells us of the able and bizarre men who took on this immense task from him, and continued to lay the foundations of modern Europe.

Tacitus' story is the earliest account of this decisive period that has come down to us. Indeed it is almost the only Latin account. Our other main literary sources are the far less serious Latin biographies of his contemporary Suetonius, and the Greek history of Dio Cassius who wrote a whole century later. As an artistic and spiritual achievement his work eclipses theirs. Dio is pedestrian, and Suetonius, for all his vividness, accepts the traditional assumption that biography is a less important *genre* than history and falls infinitely short of the unique qualities of Tacitus. If we leave literature out of it and concentrate on that elusive commodity the historical 'fact', the situation is a little different. Suetonius was an imperial secretary and amassed much curious and irreplaceable material, and Dio lived close to the imperial court of his day and possessed more personal experience of exalted affairs than Tacitus. Yet Suetonius is often no sort of a critic of his material, and Dio lacks the imagination to grasp the affairs of the early empire. Tacitus is more dependable than either. He is the best literary source for the events of the early principate that we possess. There are, of course, other significant sources, provided by archaeology, and coins, and papyri, and art. But it is chiefly upon Tacitus that we have to rely for our knowledge of a critical epoch in the history of western civilization.

## 2. WHAT TACITUS INHERITED

What he attempted in this work is hard to follow without at least a brief glance at the historians who had gone before him. The world's first historians had been Greeks. Rome's cultural debt to Greece was incalculably great, and Tacitus cannot be wholly understood without bearing in mind certain peculiar, perhaps surprising, features of Greek historical writing. In the first place, the Greeks had begun by thinking of history as extremely close to epic poetry. Indeed, history owed its technique and its very existence to Homer and other Greek epic poets. Again, when Athenian tragic drama became great in the fifth century B.C., that also influenced Greek historical writing. These two facts emerge clearly from the works of Herodotus and Thucydides. And history never quite forgot its early links with poetry. As the great Roman educationalist Quintilian (an older contemporary of Tacitus)

remarked, 'history is very near to poetry, and may be considered in some sense as poetry in prose'.

He may have been intending to make a point of style rather than content, yet the analogies went farther than that. Being so close to poetry, ancient history was often intended to arouse emotion. For one thing, it had habitually been read aloud to audiences, from the time of Herodotus onwards, and, even after silent or *sotto voce* reading gradually became more customary, the practice never ceased. Isocrates (436-338 B.C.) caused his pupils to see history as a branch of eloquence, and Greek historians after the time of Alexander the Great, such as Duris of Samos, carried the emotional, pathetic tendency to extreme lengths. This whole trend was sternly denounced by the great Polybius of Megalopolis (c. 203-120 B.C.), whose theme, although he too wrote in Greek, was nothing less than the universality of Rome. All historians of the age were influenced in one way or another by Aristotle (384-322 B.C.), who, even if his direct effect on historiography was not so extensive as has recently been supposed, enormously stimulated, through his own example and the work of his pupils, the development of a scientific attitude towards research.

Nevertheless, the emotional approach had come to stay, and particularly flourished in the Hellenistic age of later Greece when interest in biography became increasingly strong. As Roman history developed, patriotic emotion gained in importance as a factor in the situation. It is powerful, in a nostalgic way, in Sallust (86-c. 34 B.C.), who first gave the subject a magnificent Latin style, and its expression reached its zenith in Livy (59 B.C.-A.D. 17).

But patriotism is only one aspect of the moral tone that pervades Roman historians. This goes back to the very earliest of their Greek predecessors, since even Herodotus, for all his relaxed manner, had seen ethical lessons in the past. The task of edification seemed to become particularly imperative from the fourth century B.C. onwards, when philosophers had turned their main attention from speculations about the universe to the exploration of the soul of man. Decisive influences in this direction were Socrates' interest in the human personality, and the dialogues of Plato, and the *Ethics* of Aristotle. The schools of philosophy which descended from Aristotle all persisted with this moral emphasis, and none more than the Stoics whose doctrines were laid down in c. 300 B.C. by Zeno of Citium in Cyprus. He

and his successors taught that Virtue is the Supreme Good; and this idea appealed to the Romans who, if often nasty, included, at their best, men of strong moral interests and preoccupations. Indeed, Stoicism of a sort, somewhat modified by Panaetius (c. 185-? 95 B.C.) to suit the practical requirements of society, came to pervade the general culture of the Greco-Roman world.<sup>1</sup> And so it affected most historians. Among them, too, there is a vigorous atmosphere of moralizing.

A moralist seeks to persuade, to teach, and to guide. 'The art of persuasion' is one of the definitions of the ancient Art – some called it a Science – of Rhetoric. This Art or Science continued to permeate ancient culture until, as has already been mentioned, it became the staple higher education of a Roman under the empire.

Greek educational theorists, trying to map out Rhetoric in systematic terms, had actually thought of history as part of it. We find this a strange idea, living as we do in an age when 'fine writing' and grand speaking are unfashionable, and when anything of the kind among historians is particularly suspect. Cicero, who was sympathetic to the rhetorical ideals of Isocrates (p. 11), regarded the two studies as mutually beneficial. Not only, he asserted, should orators be well versed in history, but history, in its turn, needs the sort of composition practised by public speakers.<sup>2</sup> Even if its first law is truth, it possesses an especially close relation to oratory<sup>3</sup> – by which he apparently means to convey, again, that it needs rhetorical techniques for its expression.

This has certain results which we find puzzling. For instance ancient historians are very much inclined to credit their personages with speeches which they clearly did not deliver, at least not in such a shape. These speeches provide background, in rhetorical form often accentuated by a *balance* between two opposing theses. 'I have put into each speaker's mouth', says Thucydides, 'sentiments proper to the occasion, expressed as I thought he would be likely to express them.'<sup>4</sup> Similar to these masterly but imaginative reconstructions of atmosphere are certain battle-scenes. Sometimes these are not realistic narratives so much as brilliant evocations of heroism, panic, reversals of fortune,

1. Stoic thought, as expanded by Seneca (c. 5 B.C.-A.D. 65), can be read in a recent Penguin Classic (*Letters from a Stoic*).

2. Cicero, *De Oratore*, II, 62.

3. Cicero, *De Legibus*, I, 5. 3.

4. Thucydides, I, 22.



and the like. One can imagine how the battle-scenes of Tacitus were declaimed to an appreciative audience. With that in mind, a historian had to write effectively – that is, persuasively. In other words he had to write well. Cicero was convinced that a historian must not be only a scholar; he must be an artist too, and must endow his historical writing with every possible device of stylistic attractiveness.

Cicero also felt that Roman historians of earlier generations had failed to meet this requirement of a good style. For in his day (106–43 B.C.) history already had a fairly long, if not very distinguished, pedigree at Rome. As early as the third century B.C. the serious business of Roman politics – supremely important in the educated life of the Republic – had permitted and included the study and writing of history. The ‘senatorial historians’ combined varying amounts of Greek culture (the first of these writers even wrote in Greek) with a reverence for Roman traditions and institutions. This mixture must have been apparent in the lost work in which, in the second century B.C., Cato the Censor told the story of Rome from mythical times to his own day. In theory, he was opposed to the artificiality and stylistic self-consciousness of the Greeks, and he set out to demonstrate that Rome could do as well as them. In the process, he borrowed some of their stylistic devices – and indeed the very title of his book, the *Origins*, follows a Greek tradition.

Some generations before Cato, the Roman State had made a decisive contribution to history by instituting the publication of annual notices called the Records of the Priests. These were primarily concerned with the religious ritual which played such an immense part in Roman life. But this ritual involved references to political events – victories, declarations of war and peace, etc. So the Records began to summarize certain historical events. They left their mark on historians of Cato’s century. Some of these, because they too followed an annual pattern, were called Annalists; and their influence on the annalistic arrangement of Tacitus’ work is so clear that his book which is here translated was quite early known by its present title, the *Annals*.

Records of the sort that the Republican historians used were collected in an official publication of eighty volumes published in c. 123 B.C. Such records were sometimes authentic; but they were often legendary, for many myths had gathered round the origins of the

great families. And next came a generation of Annalists who expanded this sort of material in the light of rhetorical ideas imbibed from Greece.

Despite such embellishments Cicero, as I have said, found them all inadequate as artists.

The stylistic shortcomings of Roman history were amply remedied by Julius Caesar (102/100–44 B.C.), Sallust (86–c. 34 B.C.), Livy (59 B.C.–A.D. 17),<sup>1</sup> and finally, in the most remarkable fashion of all, by Tacitus.

Caesar's 'Commentaries' include the *Gallic War* and the *Civil War*, with supplements by his staff officers. Caesar was a first-rate orator, and he wrote beautifully lucid Latin – which effectively clothed unremitting political justification. His work was far from being the unshaped raw material it might seem at first sight. It was, rather, a deliberate attempt to get away from the rhetorical history of Isocrates in favour of a tougher sort of history (reminiscent rather of Thucydides), written by someone who was not a professor but a leading actor in events. Yet because of his unadorned style he was less read by the ancients than his younger contemporary Sallust. Sallust's important *Histories* have only survived in relatively small portions, notably certain speeches. But we have his *Catiline*, about that fierce nobleman's conspiracy in the sixties B.C., and his *Jugurtha*, named after a North African king against whom Rome had fought fifty years earlier. These are the first important Roman historical monographs that have come down to us. The *genre* owed a good deal to Greece, but it was Sallust who attracted to it the attention of his compatriots.

Tacitus owes Sallust something of his vivid but careful abruptness, also his mask of austere impartiality, and his habit of digressions – often including speeches to clarify character. Echoes of Sallust, too, are apparent in Tacitus' pessimistic sketch of early civilization, and in other pieces of rhetorical moralizing; he is markedly Sallustian in his trenchant attitude. As a historian of events Sallust leaves a good deal to be desired, and it was said that he ought to be read not as a historian but as an orator.<sup>2</sup> Yet the wonderful vigour and dramatic power with which he presented action and discussion made men feel that at last

1. For their works in English, see p. 437.

2. Granius Licinianus, XXXVI.

Roman history was being treated with the eloquence and stylistic skill which Cicero had demanded of it.

So it was again in the next generation, when Livy spent forty years writing that superb history of Rome which, if it had all survived (less than a quarter of it has), would have filled thirty modern volumes. Livy possessed the true antiquarian spirit, but no taste for profound research. His first ten Books are a brilliant, mythical Virgilian evocation of Rome's past.

Although Tacitus is far removed from this romantic enthusiasm and rich florid style, Livy's power to stir the emotions left a legacy to him as well as to other historians. So did Livy's rhetoric – already beginning to become a potent force in Roman education. Like Tacitus after him, Livy's chief aim was to draw from the past its moral lessons. They were based on current ethical ideas; and, encouraged by the Stoic interpretation of the Roman Empire as the vehicle of human brotherhood,<sup>1</sup> these lessons were directed to the supreme purpose of Rome's greater glory. And with Rome was associated Italy. For Livy, like Virgil and perhaps like Tacitus, came from Italy's fringes and felt the emotional patriotism which people of the frontier so often feel. All three men – Virgil, Livy and Tacitus – possessed a metropolitan bias which was both aristocratic and conservative; and Virgil, like Livy, is deliberately echoed by Tacitus.

In the three-quarters of a century following the deaths of Augustus and Livy (A.D. 17) there were a number of historical writers. Most of their works, however, are lost, and this makes it difficult to assess their influence on Tacitus. But he must have owed much of his material to them, and notably to Pliny the elder (c. A.D. 23–79), whose *Natural History* we possess though his account of his own times is lost. Probably Tacitus' stylistic debts to this and other missing works were a good deal larger than has been realized. However, these first-century historians do not seem to have possessed talents comparable with those of Caesar, Sallust, and Livy. Besides, circumstances were less favourable to them. Certain of the emperors, as readers of Tacitus will find it easy to appreciate, were touchy. Their suspicions, as he suggests, may have prevented contemporary historians from doing themselves full justice.

But there may also have been quite different reasons for the appa-

1. By Panaetius (p. 12) and especially Posidonius of Apamea (c. 135–50 B.C.).



rent decline of historiography during this period. For one thing, there seems to have been an enlargement, a wider dispersal, of historical interest. To an increased extent, writers and thinkers now devoted themselves to subjects such as geography, science, and ethnography.

### 3. TACITUS ON EMPIRE AND EMPERORS

Such tendencies are apparent in the earliest historical writings of the greatest post-Augustan historian, Tacitus. In his later publications, and particularly in the work that I have translated here, he incorporates and blends in a single structure all the traditional features of historical writing. The manuscript heading reads only 'From the death of the divine Augustus', but the title soon given to the work, the *Annals*, recalls that Roman traditions are ever apparent. Here, too, are the interests of the later, Hellenistic, Greeks: ethnology, biography, psychology, rhetorical types and situations (his battle-scenes, for example, often create more factual problems than they solve), and emotional effects, aiming at pathetic stress and seeking to make events seem tragic and terrible.

Moral purpose, too, is never absent from Tacitus' mind. The sequence of events on which he chooses to focus his attention provoked the sternest moral reflections. To him, as to many others, decline and disaster seemed due to vice. Virtue and vice are continually emphasized and contrasted. As Tacitus himself says, 'It seems to me a historian's foremost duty to ensure that merit is recorded, and to confront evil words and deeds with the fear of posterity's denunciations.'<sup>1</sup>

That was the trend of Tacitus' mind; it was also the trend of ancient historiography as a whole, with its epic, tragic, and moralizing background. These influences combined to inspire Tacitus with an exalted conception of his task. To him, history is a conspicuously elevated theme. He deliberately concentrates on subjects which contribute to his dramatic, meaningful whole.

Now the highest and most significant drama appeared to be centred on the all-powerful, glamorous, sinister imperial court. So we hear much of the emperors and their *entourages*. The Roman imperial personages do not, in our own day, any longer play an integral part in

1. *Annals*, III, 65.