

From *Princeps* to Emperor

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Germanicus embodied the quintessential imperial prince. The grandson of Marc Antony, the grandnephew of Augustus, and the son-in-law of Marcus Agrippa, he was to be the father of one emperor, the grandfather of another, and the brother of yet another. As the heir-apparent, he was groomed and trained in Roman politics. In AD 14, he was appointed as the overall commander of the Roman legions on the Rhine. In addition, he was sent on diplomatic assignments to the overseas provinces in order to solve dynastic issues, annex kingdoms, and secure peace with Parthia.¹ While touring Egypt in AD 19, Germanicus died. He was likely poisoned, though this was never proven.² The Romans greatly mourned his death and flocked from far and wide to catch a glimpse of his remains. However, they did not mourn the loss of Germanicus himself, but rather the death of his political influence. In Roman politics, Germanicus had played the crucial role of political alternative as a counterbalance to the unpopular *princeps*, Tiberius. His importance in politics was only surpassed by the consequence of his death, which became the precipitating factor in the introduction of the emperorship to Roman politics.

One reason for Germanicus' importance was how his *vultus* contrasted sharply with the *princeps* Tiberius. The *vultus* was more than just a facial expression; it allowed Romans to judge the thoughts and personality of a public figure through their outward appearance. Cicero stressed the importance of one's *vultus* in his *Second Philippic* against Marc Antony.

¹ Michael Grant, trans., *The Annals of Imperial Rome* by Cornelius Tacitus, (London: Penguin Books, 1996), 106.

² *Ibid*, 125.

He described how Marc Antony instead of wearing the traditional Roman gown and shoes, flaunted himself in “Gallic slippers” and a “barbarian mantle.”³ The focus on Antony’s clothes emphasizes Antony’s understanding of his *vultus* not as that of a traditional Roman politician, but as an eastern king. Thus, Augustus undermined Antony’s political standing by creating a contrasting Roman *vultus* for himself.

Due in part to his negative *vultus*, Tiberius was ill-received by the Romans. Tiberius was not very handsome, said to be “tall and abnormally thin, bent and bald.”⁴ Furthermore, his meetings with the Senate indicate that he was frequently misunderstood and a poor public speaker.⁵ His words were “always hesitant, always cryptic” and they concealed his sentiments.⁶ Moreover, Tiberius often generated or displayed suspicion. When Catus brought to Tiberius evidence damning Marcus Scribonius Libo, he met with Libo, but did not confront him on the charges; rather he “concealed his malevolence” and noted Libo’s actions to use later in an attack.⁷ Most importantly, Tiberius’s uncertain character not only affected his own reputation, but also began to adversely affect the political climate. During his reign, more and more accusers brought charges against the aristocracy concerning treason,⁸ libel against Augustus,⁹ and senatorial extravagance.¹⁰ Thus, when Germanicus died, the Romans, in imitation of their *princeps*, immediately began to accuse Tiberius of

³ Marcus Tullius Cicero, *Second Phillipic*, 76.

⁴ Michael Grant, trans., *The Annals of Imperial Rome*, 186.

⁵ *Ibid*, 40.

⁶ *Ibid*, 39.

⁷ *Ibid*, 90.

⁸ *Ibid*, 138.

⁹ *Ibid*, 73.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 92.

foul play.¹¹ In this way, his suspicious nature and policies negatively affected the way that people viewed both Tiberius and political culture overall.

Germanicus's *vultus*, on the other hand, earned positive reactions from the Romans. Allegedly, everyone respected his looks and words. And upon his death, both Romans and foreigners alike reminisced that he was friendly and forgiving, possessing "the dignity and grandeur, befitting his lofty rank" and they grieved his loss (Tac. *Ann.* 113). In addition, at his funeral, people praised his "fine character" and modest pleasures (Tac. *Ann.* 113). As a result of his positive *vultus*, "he won...intense popular devotion" (Suet. *Caligula* 4) as well as the loyalty of the army (Tac. *Ann.* 73). Despite their adoration, Germanicus was probably not very well known in Rome. In AD 14, he was appointed as the commander of the two Roman armies on the Rhine, the Army of Upper and Lower Germany. Subsequent to his two campaigns against the Germans, he was assigned as proconsul to Asia, where he died in AD 19. Thus, for at least five years he was not present in Rome herself. It is, therefore, unlikely that Romans knew much of substance about Germanicus or even saw him, except when Tiberius occasionally called him back to Rome to celebrate a military triumph.¹² As a result, his popular reputation did not so much arise from his philanthropic actions as much as from the negative reactions to Tiberius who *was* in Rome. Because his *vultus* led the Romans to suspect and distrust Tiberius, Germanicus became the mystical, ideal public figure who would succeed the aged Tiberius.

Germanicus not only represented the positive alternative to the poorly received Tiberius; but through his German campaigns he also revived Roman military glory. Before

¹¹ *Ibid*, 116, 120.

¹² *Ibid*, 89.

Augustus secured the *princeps* for himself, civil wars had ravaged Rome and her provinces. Fifty years after the fact, people still remembered the proscriptions, the death, and the destructions of Romans at the hands of Romans. The Senate Decree concerning Gnaeus Piso suggests the Romans' trepidation concerning civil war by charging him with attempting "to stir up civil war by trying to return to the province of Syria after the death of Germanicus Caesar."¹³ Ending a civil war was also a huge propaganda success. Augustus wisely claimed in his *Res Gestae* that he had "extinguished civil war."¹⁴ In addition, he closed the temple of Janus Quirinus three times, indicating to the people that the empire was finally at peace. However, after the civil wars the next military operations the Romans undertook in the reign of Augustus were defeats. In 16 BC, Lollius was defeated by the Germans. Then in AD 9, Varus' legions were infamously defeated and destroyed. Until Germanicus, the Romans had little to boast of regarding their military accomplishments.

Germanicus restored pride in Roman military achievement by winning victories against the Germans. Upon his initial invasion of Germany, the Roman army ravaged the countryside of the Marsi tribe. Shortly thereafter, the other Germanic tribes around the territory of the Marsi attacked the Romans. In order to lend support to the routing legions, Germanicus himself led the twenty first legion into the fray. They beat back the Germans into a field where they inflicted heavy losses upon them.¹⁵ Similarly, at the Battle of Weser River, a favorable omen allegedly appeared in the sky. When Germanicus saw eight eagles

¹³ D. S. Potter, Cynthia Damon, "Senatus Consultum de Cn. Pisone Patre," *The American Journal of Philology*, Vol. 120, No. 1 (Spring, 1999), pp. 13-42. The Johns Hopkins University Press, 21.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 34.

¹⁵ Michael Grant, trans., *The Annals of Imperial Rome*, 83.

flying into the forest, he ordered the army to follow them and attack. The Romans subsequently won a sound victory.

Germanicus was not, however, an extraordinary military leader; in fact, he often put his armies in unnecessary danger. The experienced German commander Arminius lured Germanicus into the same trap as he did Varus. The Romans found themselves in a swampy forest surrounded by “slimy, treacherous bog, clinging mud intersected by streams”¹⁶ near Teutoborgian Wood, where Varus had been defeated. Here, the Germans relentlessly attacked the Romans and they were winning until they “stopped killing and went after loot”¹⁷ The Romans capitalized on this stroke of luck and eventually routed the Germans. Later, during the second campaign, Germanicus decided to advance into German territory by boat. He succeeded in getting to the Weser River where he was able to urge “his men to kill and kill.”¹⁸ However, on the way back to Gaul, a storm scattered most of the fleet and killed many men. Poor planning and near disasters characterized both of Germanicus’ campaigns. This indicates either that Germanicus was truly not a strong military commander, or that achieving decisive victories was not his objective, but rather augmenting his own reputation in Rome through the use of warfare.

Despite all these near disasters and mediocre victories, the Romans still regarded Germanicus a hero. For one, he succeeded in securing two of the three legionary standards that Varus lost. Augustus had likewise obtained the standards lost by Crassus in Parthia through diplomacy. Germanicus was very astute to realize that the return of the legionary standards would also enhance his glory. In addition, Germanicus led his army to the

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 68.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 70.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 86.

Teutoborgian Wood, where he conducted an elaborate funeral ritual to the fallen soldiers. He turned over the first piece of sod for the funeral monument showing his men that “he shared in the general grief.”¹⁹ The fact that he claimed to have seen eight eagles in the sky before the Battle of Weser River also clarifies Germanicus’ propaganda strategy. In the manner of Augustus, he was able to claim that his cause had divine favor. It is clear that the Romans were not as concerned with the grade of success as much as with the platitudes that Germanicus sent back to them. Furthermore, so long as the Germans did not rout him, he could send deputations back to Rome claiming overwhelming success. Therefore, Romans envisioned Germanicus as a hero in a faraway territory, defeating the barbarian tribes and returning glory to Rome.

Most importantly, Germanicus was the mature and able apparent heir to the *princeps*. When Tiberius became *princeps*, he was already fifty-six years old. At this age Julius Caesar was in poor health.²⁰ No one could be sure how much longer Tiberius would live; and if Tiberius died without an heir civil war would commence. Augustus recognized this possibility and always had an heir in the public sphere. Shortly after his accession, he minted coins that depicted himself and Marcus Agrippa as equals. After Agrippa died, Augustus began to train Lucius and Gaius Caesar to be the heirs by sending them on missions to the provinces and by building public works in their names.²¹ When Augustus died, he ordered in his will that Tiberius should adopt Germanicus. This act made Germanicus the heir apparent over Tiberius’ own son, Drusus. Germanicus’ position was

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 67.

²⁰ Suetonius, R. Graves, et al. “Divius Julius,” *The Twelve Caesars*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1979), 45.

²¹ *Ibid*, 64, 29.

further augmented when he took a leading role in the government and imperial leadership. In a symbolic gesture he was made co-consul with Tiberius.²² Moreover, he was made the commander-in-chief of the largest deployment of Roman soldiers in the empire and celebrated triumphs for his victories over the Germans.²³ Furthermore, the Senate gave him *imperium* in the overseas provinces which he used to form treaties with the Parthians, annex Cappadocia,²⁴ and settle dynastic conflicts in Armenia.²⁵ At the time of his death he was primed to succeed Tiberius as the *princeps* and everyone knew it.

In light of the cult of Germanicus' personality, his powerful faction, and his influence in imperial politics, his death proved problematic for two reasons. The first reason is that his death revealed a weakness in the definition of imperial authority in the Roman political system. When the Senate gave him *imperium* in the overseas provinces, Tiberius replaced the original governor of Syria with his own legate Gnaeus Cornelius Piso.²⁶ As a result, there arose between Germanicus and Piso a conflict of authority. Germanicus frequently gave orders Piso failed to acknowledge. In one instance, Germanicus ordered Piso to send a detachment of the Syrian garrison to him;²⁷ Piso did not. Later while Germanicus was in Egypt, he found that his orders to divisional commanders and magistrates "were cancelled or reversed."²⁸ However despite this insubordination, Germanicus did not fire Piso; when Piso finally left Syria, it was of his own accord.²⁹ Therefore, uncertainty existed regarding

²² Michael Grant, trans., *The Annals of Imperial Rome*, 134.

²³ *Ibid*, 64.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 98.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 105-106.

²⁶ *Ibid*, 98.

²⁷ *Ibid*, 106.

²⁸ *Ibid*, 111.

²⁹ *Ibid*, 111.

the authority of both Germanicus and Piso; Germanicus had been given authority by the Senate, while Piso was appointed by Tiberius.

When Germanicus died, two of his assistants, Quintus Servaeus and Quintus Veranius, brought charges against Piso in Rome. At the end of the trial, Piso was convicted of bribery of the soldiers, abandonment of the province, insults against the commander, and inciting civil war.³⁰ However, Piso was not found guilty of killing Germanicus. The Senate then issued a decree concerning this trial and their verdict. In the decree concerning Gnaeus Piso, the Senate and Tiberius finally defined Germanicus' and Piso's respective *imperium*. Piso had been assigned as a special assistant to Germanicus and Germanicus was given "greater *imperium* than the province's proconsular governor."³¹ However, Tiberius had greater *imperium* than Germanicus. This trial resulted in a greater concentration of power in the imperial family. This was the first action that culminated in the establishment of an emperorship. The Senate decided that there were "certain affairs [that] required the presence of Tiberius or his two sons."³² This indicates that there became a clearer role of the imperial house in Roman politics. The *princeps* was no longer the position defined by Augustus, who said in his *Res Gestae*: "I exceeded all in influence, but I had no greater power than the others who were colleagues with me in each magistracy,"³³ but rather by certain tasks that required a member of the imperial family. Moreover, even though Tiberius had appointed Piso as governor with the authority, jurisdiction, and

³⁰ *Ibid*, 125.

³¹ D. S. Potter, Cynthia Damon, "Senatus Consultum de Cn. Pisone Patre," 19.

³² *Ibid*, 19.

³³ Augustus, *Res Gestae*, 34.

garrison of that position,³⁴ the day after his trial he was found dead. Throughout the affair, Tiberius supported two different stances on Piso's authority, yet each time his decision was final. Now, the *princeps's* authority superseded all others.

The second difficulty is that Germanicus' death created a power vacuum in Rome, one which resulted in all imperial power concentrated in the hands of Tiberius. Tiberius had only one son, Drusus, whom he supported against Germanicus' faction.³⁵ At the time of Germanicus' death, Drusus had very little political influence. In addition, Drusus did not have the support of an army nor the people, as Germanicus had. Thus, Drusus did not have the influence or faction to significantly affect the political landscape. The decree concerning Piso alludes to this fact. The decree stated: "Senate hoped that the one who survives would be all the more an object of the immortal gods' concern insofar as they understood that all future hope of his father's guardianship of the state was now placed in one man."³⁶ Here, they lent their support to Drusus, "the one that survives." This may have been an attempt to give further political influence to Drusus. However, three years after the decree in AD 22, Tiberius finally gave Drusus the tribunician powers.³⁷ Because Tiberius delayed in promoting Drusus' political power, another faction filled the resulting power vacuum.

Without the influence and power of Germanicus and before Tiberius had given the tribunician powers to Drusus, Sejanus, the Praetorian Prefect, came to prominence. In this three-year window, he secured his faction and systematically killed or had exiled many

³⁴ Michael Grant, trans., *The Annals of Imperial Rome*, 106.

³⁵ *Ibid*, 99.

³⁶ D. S. Potter, Cynthia Damon, "Senatus Consultum de Cn. Pisone Patre," 35.

³⁷ Michael Grant, trans., *The Annals of Imperial Rome*, 148.

prominent members of the imperial family and Germanicus' faction. By the time Drusus realized that "Sejanus had secured his own camp,"³⁸ Sejanus had effectively replaced him as the main political collaborator with Tiberius. As a result, in AD 23 he consolidated his own power by unifying the nine battalions of the Praetorian Guard into one camp.³⁹ In the same year, Drusus was killed and Sejanus attempted to marry his widow, Livilla. With Drusus dead, Germanicus' sons, Drusus Caesar and Nero Caesar, became heirs-apparent. Before Sejanus attacked the imperial family outright, he removed the remaining supporters of Germanicus and Agrippina. Eventually in AD 30, he convinced Tiberius to exile Agrippina and incarcerate Nero and Drusus Caesar. He was at the height of his power and Tacitus implies that Tiberius intended to marry Sejanus to Drusus' daughter Livia Julia. This marriage would have made Sejanus the heir apparent and second most powerful man in Rome. However, Tiberius had Sejanus executed shortly after he won the consulship in AD 31. Even though Sejanus was no longer a threat to the imperial family, he had done enough damage. Tiberius died in AD 37 without a viable heir.

Because the power vacuum created by Germanicus' death had allowed Sejanus to kill many potential heirs of the imperial family, the Senate was forced to elect an emperor by official decree and out of necessity. When Tiberius died, he left the *princeps* to Germanicus' son Caligula and Drusus' son Gemellus; Sejanus had left very few of the heirs alive, let alone competent ones. The fact that Tiberius left two heirs to the *princeps* was problematic because, as seen with Piso and Germanicus, forced power-sharing eventually led to conflict. Therefore, the Senate passed a law which annulled Tiberius' will and vested

³⁸ *Ibid*, 160.

³⁹ *Ibid*, 158.

all power in Caligula, neither the most senior nor most capable heir, nor the son of the *princeps*. He had held only two minor offices, pontifex and quaestor, before becoming emperor. But most importantly for the Senate, Caligula came from the imperial family. The way in which Caligula was chosen contrasts sharply with the way in which Tiberius became *princeps*, whom Augustus adopted as heir in his will as he was the most senior and capable politician to succeed him in this position. Therefore, in the second step which contributed to the creation of the emperor, the Senate confirmed it necessary to have a *princeps*, who must come from the imperial family, even if that *princeps* was a less than desirable politician. In addition, the Senate's authority now superseded the will of the previous *princeps* in choosing the next *princeps*. Therefore, the Senate decree concerning Gnaeus Piso as well as the Senate's confirmation of Caligula as sole heir, effectively creating the office of the emperor, whose duties were distinct from and authority more powerful than the other imperial magistrates, and who must be a member of the imperial family.

In conclusion, Germanicus' death had far-reaching implications. As the second most powerful figure in early first-century politics his death caused the Senate and Tiberius to strictly define imperial authority as fundamentally distinct from and superior to the other magistracies. In addition, Germanicus' death created the power vacuum which was filled by Sejanus who, in his bid for power, destroyed much of the imperial family. It was this destruction that forced the Senate to elect from the imperial family the sole heir by canceling Tiberius' will. These two actions created the basis of the new office of the emperor. Germanicus, however, was not the victim of the Roman political system; he was an expression of a disease that plagued Rome: factionalism. In fact, his precedent made Sejanus' faction possible. It is important to note two other important repercussions of the

stress which Germanicus' death put on the imperial system. The first is that because Sejanus unified the Praetorian Guard into a single camp, they assumed a more prominent role in Roman politics and in choosing the emperor. For example, when Caligula was murdered, his uncle Claudius was conveyed to the Praetorian camp and was there proclaimed emperor. The second is that in both actions, namely the decree concerning Piso and the election of Caligula as emperor, it was the Senate that played the defining role. This leads one to question whether Rome was at this time a *de facto* monarchy or whether, as Augustus would have claimed, the emperor was merely the highest office in a Republic.

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