

Greater than the Great: Germanicus and Alexander in Tacitus

At Germanicus' death, Tacitus introduces a telling rhetorical *comparatio* of Alexander the Great and Germanicus. Despite the fact that he cites anonymous persons (*Ann.* 2.73.1, *erant qui...*) as his source, his wording indicates that he agrees in substance with all of the key points of association, namely their similar appearance, age, and place and manner of death. Also the more detailed comparison found in the following lengthy *nam* clause, though apparently attributed to Tacitus' anonymous source, is reinforced by Tacitus' own description of Germanicus in the preceding narrative. Moreover, some of the points in the *nam* clause suggest that Germanicus is, in fact, greater than Alexander. For example, he says Germanicus was "mild toward his friends, modest in his enjoyment of pleasures, married only to one woman, and had certain children" (2.73.2). To anyone familiar with the Alexander tradition and with Tacitus' sinister implications, it is easy to see the thinly veiled criticism of Alexander who was known for killing his friends (Clitus, Parmenio, Callisthenes), for drinking to excess, and for having unconfirmed or illegitimate heirs (the dubious Heracles with his mistress Barsine and the posthumous Alexander IV with his queen Roxana).

Gissel (2001) and Borzsák (1982) have already outlined many specific scenes and features of the Tacitean narrative that clearly allude to the historiographic tradition of Alexander. However, since the *comparatio* itself serves to elevate Germanicus to a status superior in some ways to his model Alexander, it is useful to consider what other models may be operative in Tacitus' presentation of Germanicus, particularly if these models are shared by Alexander.

Here I examine several points of comparison between Germanicus and Hercules. Both meet death because of poison and are publicly cremated on a pyre. Moreover, Germanicus meets Arminius, who may himself be viewed as a Germanic rival of Hercules, in a forest sacred to Heracles (*Ann.* 2.12.1). This allusion to Hercules recalls Tacitus' comments about the hero in his *Germania* (3.1, 9.1, 34.2-3). Notably Alexander never equaled the supposed western conquests of his model Hercules, though by conquering Germans Germanicus had surpassed Hercules' Iberian and Gallic campaigns. Furthermore, Tacitus alludes to an important historiographic idea—the belief that there were many Herculesees and that later ones imitated earlier ones—when Germanicus visits Egypt to view the monuments of its great conquerors (*Ann.* 2.60.1-2). Through close analysis of these passages, I will show that Tacitus is, in fact, bypassing Alexander and directly comparing Germanicus with Alexander's own chief model Heracles.

Bibliography

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