

## *Imperium* and one-man rule in Tacitus' *Histories*

*Imperium* has long been a central focus in the study of political, constitutional and military history of Rome. Strictly a term denoting the power held by Roman magistrates to command troops, the meaning of *imperium* varied across time, often coming to mean the power Rome held across the Mediterranean. Understanding this term has been crucial to mapping the institutional framework of the Roman empire, and also crucial to filling out Roman conceptions of power in how it relates to themselves and others, be it other polities and people, free and enslaved.

During the Principate, too, the meaning of *imperium* comes to relate to its primary holder: the Roman Emperor. Most discussions, therefore, percolate around his power and how to describe it, be it rulership or the raw power itself and where it comes from, embedded in long scholarly discussions from Mommsen, through Weber and more recently from figures such as Cooley, Drogula, Flaig, Gotter and Hekster (Cooley 2019; Drogula 2015; Flaig 2019; Hekster 2023; Gotter 2008). Not to mention the enormous amount of (crucial) work on other adjacent terms for power and the office(s) the emperor held, be it *auctoritas*, *imperium maius proconsulare*, the *tribunicia potestas* and so on, calibrated differently depending on scholarly preference (Rich 2012; Vervaeke 2014). The gravitational pull of the Roman emperor is such that discussions of *imperium* are pulled in his direction. The history of power in this age is the history of the emperor.

My paper attempts to cut through the scholarly discussion to focus on the contribution to the intellectual development of *imperium* by our main guide to the early principate: Tacitus. I explore how Tacitus uses *imperium* in his narrative of the political upheaval of AD 69, and how

Tacitus uses this oft-considered technical term to denote the power of the Roman emperor himself. Exploring how Tacitus' uses other words of power, too, I situate the narrowing of the definition of *imperium* that comes to be dominated by the emperor himself. With crucial comparanda from other authors in the imperial age, Tacitus' use of *imperium* stands in contrast to the overly constitutional and institutional views of magisterial power that are so important in understanding the republican age. This development accentuates how political terminology of republican institutions have been altered by one-man rule, and serves to accentuate Tacitus' point on how much has changed despite seeming the same, especially language (Haynes 2004). The goal, therefore, is to place Tacitus within the context of the political and intellectual conceptions of power at Rome.

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