

What Might Have Been: Syncrisis and Power Politics in Tacitus' *Agricola*

This essay argues that Tacitus, in his biography of his father-in-law, subtly suggests that Agricola, as a model general, could have also been a model emperor and that, if he had taken advantage of the hand fortune dealt him, might have been the one to succeed Domitian. This argument hinges on the claim that Tacitus did not harbor any republican sympathies and truly believed that Rome, at the time of Domitian, needed an emperor. This essay reviews some scholarly opinions concerning Tacitus' political beliefs and attempts to lay a foundation from which the argument may proceed: namely, that Tacitus' political beliefs concerning the empire and the principate as expressed in his *Annals* indicate that he was an imperialist and not a republican. In the *Agricola*, this essay argues that Tacitus contrasts Domitian and Agricola to point out discreetly that the latter had at the same time both the "virtues" needed to make an effective emperor and the ones necessary to make a *good* emperor. In his long discourse on Agricola's campaign in Britain, Tacitus demonstrates that Agricola had the qualities to make a good and effective emperor. In the *Agricola*, Britain can be taken as a microcosm of the empire, in which Agricola is the *imperator*. With Britain as his medium, Tacitus shows his readers what the empire was and what it could be. Britain, just like Rome, had a long string of corrupt rulers. After Agricola took power, however, he rooted out the corruption, stopped the oppression of the Britons, and brought peace and order to the province. Although Tacitus does not depict every political move of Agricola in a positive light, he does paint Agricola's martial actions in Britain as those of the model Roman general. Agricola's actions in Britain align with the Roman mission given to Aeneas in Book 6 of the *Aeneid*: "to lay down the law of peace, to be merciful to the conquered and beat the haughty down" (*Aeneid* 6.851-853).

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