

## Chance, Choice, and Change: Finding Augustus in Tacitus, *Annals* 1.9-10

In the absence of contemporary historical sources from the age of Augustus, Gabba surveys the Greek and Roman historians and concludes: “Tacitus is the last, almost impotent protagonist of an approach which applied to the historical interpretation of Augustus and the Empire the unattainable political ideal of a centre of power susceptible to influence from below” (Gabba 1984).

I should like to rescue Tacitus from last place and demonstrate his potency as a source for Augustus by examining the obituary at *Annals* 1.9-10. First, we shall see that the Augustan center of power was susceptible to influence, though not so much from below, not from individuals or even the Senate; rather, Augustus was susceptible to the chance circumstances in which he found himself, and he was subject to the choices he made at any given moment in the face of those unique circumstances. I then identify in Tacitus’ language an awareness of change over time, what I call the “delta factor.” Neither the Augustan institution nor attitudes toward it were static entities but the result of dynamic processes that continued long after his death. If we lend ourselves to the ironies of the passage, then we begin to see the importance of change over time and to recognize that centers of power are susceptible—that they are created and maintained by their vulnerabilities as much as by their exercise of sheer force or domination.

The temporal markers in *Annals* 1.9 (*tunc*, *dum*, and *postquam*) indicate the passing of time and the changing circumstances under which Augustus was constrained to make his choices. His ascent did not take place under static conditions. The topic of paragraph 9 is stated clearly enough: *multus hinc ipso de Augusto sermo*. Augustus is the antecedent of the pronoun *eius*, and his life comes under scrutiny by the *prudentes* in sentence 9.3. Yet Tacitus does not distinguish

between Octavian and Augustus—not in paragraph 9, and in fact nowhere in the *Annals*. Such monolithic nomenclature militates against the perception of change indicated by the temporal adverbs. Tacitus thus creates the problem in his grammar, whereby he describes a static entity, “Augustus,” in terms that call attention to his dynamic rise to power. Tacitean irony is thus born in the space between what is said (*tunc, dum, postquam*) and what is not said (*Octavianus*).

It is also clear that the composition of his subjects—the men he worked for and against, the men who worked for and against him—kept changing as well, as evidenced most explicitly in that memorable line, *Annals* 1.3.7: “Young men were born after Actium, even several of the elders born during the civil wars: was there anyone left who had seen the republic?” (*quotus quisque reliquus, qui rem publicam uidisset?*). Most scholars agree that *Annals* 1.9-10 records the attitudes alive in Tacitus’ own time (whether his disappointment with Trajan specifically or his hostility toward the principate in general), and although Shotter and Tränkle fail to convince that the *Totengericht* contains the opinions current in 14 AD, nevertheless they remind us that such opinions existed, were not consistent among all of Augustus’ ever-changing subjects, and were not persistent over time. Indeed, Tacitus’ own attitude toward Augustus was not static. Had he fulfilled his promise at *Annals* 3.24.3 to write a history of Augustus, no doubt his attitude would have changed too. We may assume that the changing realities were as apprehended and misapprehended by Augustus’ lost contemporaries as they were by the later generations accessible to us.

#### Bibliography

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