

## *Severitas* as Anachronism in Tacitus's Characterization of the Imperial Army

The myth of the Roman army's iron discipline belies its imperfections and idiosyncrasies. An admiring outsider, Josephus, presents an idealized Roman army that is uniformly drilled, but his own narrative contradicts this (*Jewish War* 3.73-75, 102-104). One aspect of this problem is the Roman commander's significant discretion in maintaining discipline and morale, which could erode from various factors including civil strife, defeat, and license (Wellesley 1969, 89). Although disorderly and vociferous soldiers were not unique to the imperial period, the frequency and scale of their disobedience was. As Ash notes, for example, it was especially obscene when Roman soldiers displayed the decapitated head of Galba among the *signa*, the traditional emblems of military order (Ash 2009, 91). In Tacitus's historical works, Rome's soldiery is in a state of decay, a symptom of the principate's corruption, which rots everything that its long reach is able to touch (e.g. *Histories* 1.46. 1.51, 2.69).

To meet the complex challenges of commanding under the emperors, a minority still evince old-fashioned *severitas*. Tacitus describes this as a quaint characteristic, which is manifest in the strict enforcement of discipline through harsh penalties and rigorous training (e.g. *Annals* 6.32, 11.18, 12.12). Strict commanders are further characterized by *imperatoria brevitatis*, a preference for authoritativeness over eloquence (*Histories* 1.18; Saddington 1991, 3493). These rare commanders, who have refused in part to succumb to the vices of the age, have common threads in their backward looking styles. Although Tacitus seems to admire these military men, quaintness does not constitute an automatic virtue in his works (Syme 1970, 137).

I argue that Tacitus's ambiguity towards *severitas* is an embedded contradiction, a reflection on the perverse times when senators were expected to lead as their ancestors but in a sham republic. Pelling discusses Tacitus's "voiceprint," and notes "...where talking about the

most sensitive topics, if one were sensible, rarely meant talking straight” (Pelling 2009, 166f.). Acknowledging this facet is also useful for understanding his characterization of army. *Severitas* is anachronistic throughout Tacitus’s works and, while sometimes implemented successfully, is not always praiseworthy. This is despite the conscious traditionalism of Tacitus and his Roman readers, who would have been familiar with the nature of the army and the times. Stern but successful commanders like Corbulo and Apronius are anachronisms, and so are those whose severity contributed to their own downfalls, including the stingy Galba and the nostalgic camp prefect, Aufidienus Rufus. Maintaining discipline required initiative and tact, especially in the imperial period, which not all officers had the character to master. The most successful practice moderation, e.g. Agricola (*Agricola* 19), which fits his broader theme of adapting to life under the principate. The need for moderation relates to Tacitus’s view of the times: Roman soldiers cannot be led alone by old-fashioned severity, since they are not the same men. Goodyear provides an apt description of Tacitus, “...a historian who wavers between nostalgia for the past and realistic acceptance of the present” (Goodyear 1970, 16).

The “Face of Battle” and “War and Society” approaches of military historians are useful for understanding the nature of the Roman army in Tacitus’s works (Lendon 2005, Phang 2011). Nevertheless, my aim is to better understand the Roman army in a literary context, as it is one of most important “‘collective’ characters” in Roman historiography (Dudley 1968).

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