

Public Spectacle and Memory in the *Annals* of Tacitus

At *Annals* 1.8-10, Tacitus relates the funeral and public commemoration of Augustus and his regime, focusing primarily on its popular reception. At the end of the second and the beginning of the third books, Tacitus records the cremation and commemoration of the dead Germanicus, once more laying special emphasis on the popular response to the public events. In both contexts, the popular response is described in negative terms - in Augustus' case since the carefully crafted spectacle failed to achieve its purpose of imposing a uniformly positive vision of his career, in Germanicus' case since the restrained commemoration, stemming from the fact that his actual funeral had been in Antioch and the honors voted months earlier, sparked popular indignation at the absence of honors that the prince - in the people's mind - should have received upon the return of his ashes to Rome. In both cases, I argue, Tacitus uses outsider observations - from the perspective of the contemporary audience - to make a claim about the nature of power, namely that public spectacle, despite its carefully arranged pageantries (Flower 1999 and Lott 2012 on funerals in Rome), is incapable of shaping the meaning or memory it is trying to shape. This technique of offering outsider observations and bringing one's own audience in dialogue with contemporary views is characteristic of Tacitus' work. The failure of public spectacle to dictate its meaning or reception points up one of the principal struggles of the Julio-Claudian Principate, namely its attempt to make sense of its existence and the relationship of later *principes* to its founder.

In addition to illustrating the limits of public spectacle, Tacitus' approach raises other concerns about the nature of power during the early Principate. One such concern is audience expectation. The popular indignation at Tiberius for failing to organize a public funeral for Germanicus in addition to the honors already bestowed on him - both in Antioch and by the

senate in Rome (preserved in the *Tabula Siarensis* and *Tabula Hebana*: see now Lott 2012) - is striking because it is entirely unfounded (Woodman and Martin 1996, 98-99 on Tac. *Ann.* 3.5). While Tiberius' moderation surrounding the events of Germanicus' death is often taken as evidence of the emperor's envious character (so, e.g., González 1984, 79 upon the discovery of the *Tab. Siar.*; Woodman and Martin 1996, 99; Lott 2012, 41), it in fact shows him dealing properly with this type of public event. As Tacitus points out, the trial of Piso was pending and Tiberius was concerned that what was already a difficult situation, somewhat enflamed by the elder Agrippina's behavior, might lead to violence. The popular response that Tacitus reports reflects his understanding of the wider problem Tiberius faced in dealing with Germanicus, and underscores Tacitus' theme of the constant struggle to restrain popular emotion as a fundamental feature of the Augustan regime.

Bibliography

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