

“Cure the disease and kill the patient”: The Role of Doctors in Tacitus’ *Annals*.

The Roman distaste for Greek physicians was expressed as early as the beginning of the second century BCE by Cato the Censor. However, in the following centuries the number of Greek doctors who lived and worked in Rome steadily rose, and this distaste became even greater under the emperors (King 2001). In an attempt to improve people’s opinion of doctors, Augustus, confirming Caesar’s law, granted Roman citizenship to all foreign physicians who were practicing their profession in the capital (Nutton 1992). Despite such efforts, prejudice against Greek doctors persisted in Roman society. The majority, with the exception of certain prestigious doctors, were regarded as hungry immigrants who used to sell their culture at the Romans’ expense, and even worse, they were able to commit homicide with complete impunity under the protection of their profession (Horstmanshoff 1999).

These stereotypes were still held by substantial proportions of the populace when Tacitus was writing his *Annals*. But since he claimed to have written his history *sine ira et studio* (1.1.3), one would expect him to portray physicians without prejudice. However, the passages dealing with Eudemus, Charicles, and Xenophon seem to imply a certain awareness of, and agreement with, the public’s view of doctors. The three aforementioned doctors are sketched in a very negative way through their participation in plots and conspiracies against Drusus (4.3), Tiberius (6.50), and Claudius (12.67) respectively. But Tacitus also depicts another physician, Staius Annaeus, this time without any negative comments about his personality (15.64). The question that arises is whether the historian was influenced by public opinion, and if so, to what extent.

In this paper I claim that Tacitus’ depictions of these physicians is consistent with his programmatic statement. The negative portrayal of Eudemus, Charicles, and Xenophon is not triggered so much by Roman prejudice against Greek doctors, but by the influence these doctors

exercised on the imperial family. Besides, in *Annals* 4.32-33 Tacitus claims that he will not spend time and pages on trivial matters. Thus the reader should understand that the episodes involving these physicians play a significant role towards the author's purposes, i.e. to reveal the political implications behind the events described (Sailor 2008).

I shall begin with a discussion of the passages referring to each physician in order to make clear how their personalities are sketched by Tacitus. By comparing the depictions of Eudemus, Xenophon, Charicles with that of Statius Annaeus, I underline the critical stance of Tacitus which is not directed at the profession of the physician, but at the influence of the first three on the imperial family, and their role in the change of the political scene in Rome. Finally, I show how the doctors' similarities with the infamous poisoners Locusta and Martina indicate the loose distinction between doctors and poisoners, and reveal some form of Tacitean bias against Greek doctors.

Bibliography

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