

Excessive Public Grief at the Death of Germanicus in AD 19

The death in AD 19 of Tiberius's adopted son, Germanicus Julius Caesar, threw the Roman Empire into a rarely seen and highly undignified grief, which our sources probably exaggerate in order to demonstrate the unpopularity of the emperor Tiberius. Tacitus and Suetonius document outpours of mass grief among the common people who had no close association or connection with Germanicus but regarded him as the last hope of honor, justice, and decency; the audience old enough to remember 1968 will see distinct parallels. Although Tacitus *Ann.* 2.73 likens Germanicus's career, achievements, and charisma to Alexander the Great, the public reaction to his death more closely resembles that of his ancestor by triple adoption, the Divine Julius, including a brief civil war and also that of Clodius in 52 BC. Neither were normal by any stretch of the imagination.

The hysteria that followed the news of the death of Germanicus, the joy at a false report of his survival, and the renewed frenzy upon his verified death cast aside all normal standards of grief, especially considering the Roman reputation for stoic perseverance in the face of hardship. Tiberius attempted to display a stoic response (Tacitus says to conceal his joy) and lead by example, but other Romans, wholly ignoring his role model, dropped any prospect of *sang froid* and behaved as if the death of Germanicus equated the downfall of the state. Their reaction contrasts entirely with the composure and ritual at funerals of other beloved statesmen – including Augustus in AD 14, which included hired mourners and the show of grief.

The life and the tragedy of the early death of Germanicus have appealed to historians and artists alike, beyond Tacitus, Suetonius, and Dio. For the 1750th anniversary, the American artist Benjamin West painted *Agrippina Landing at Brundisium with the Ashes of Germanicus* (1768).

Historians cling to the good and evil paradigm in Tacitus that the influence or threat of Germanicus ever grated on Tiberius but also kept in check his worst instincts so long as Germanicus lived. Thereafter, Tiberius indulged himself in all the worst vices. The truth is more complicated, nevertheless, the extreme reactions of the public to news of the death and a false report of Germanicus's recovery seem to assign prescience to the Roman people that liberty was dead and naked tyranny was Rome's fate. Few Romans loved or admired Tiberius, but if they really had prescience, they would have known his administration was stable and a far lesser evil than that which followed: Germanicus's son, Caligula.