

Tiberius, Asinius Gallus, and the Floods of 15 CE

In 15 CE, early in Tiberius' reign, Tiber floods submerged much of Rome. As both Cassius Dio and Tacitus tell the story, Tiberius opted for a practical response over a religious one (Tac. Ann. 1.76.1, Dio 57.14.7-8). Tacitus provides a glimpse of the discussions in the Senate: Asinius Gallus proposed that the floods be considered a prodigy and that the Sibylline books be consulted, but Tiberius refused. Instead, he commissioned a group of senators to oversee the maintenance of the Tiber and its banks.

Most scholars, relying on Tacitus' general depiction of Gallus as an enemy of Tiberius and a threat to his reign, see Gallus' proposal as an attempt to undermine the emperor. Syme suggests that he was trying to "embarrass the government." A *quindecimvir sacris faciundis* of several decades' standing, Gallus "proposed a consultation of the Sibylline books, no doubt knowing what things would emerge" (Syme 1958, i.281. For Gallus' enrollment in the *quindecimviral* priesthood, see Hoffman 1952, 289-94, who dates Gallus' tenure to shortly before 19 BCE). The implication, of course, is that the Sibylline collection contained oracles that could be used against Tiberius. Shotter suggests that "if Gallus' purpose was to embarrass he may have momentarily succeeded," despite the fact that the proposal itself failed (Shotter 1971, 448). In this case, the embarrassment derived not from the contents of the books, which were never read, but from the fact that Gallus suggested a remedy that the *princeps* could only refuse, thus implicitly confirming the potential threat of the oracles.

But others see Gallus' proposal as routine or even flippant. Levick (105) suggests that it "was sarcastic; and prompted by his earlier experiences with the Tiber and its banks." (When Gallus was consul under Augustus in 8 BCE, he had been responsible for establishing the banks

of the Tiber, as many *cippi* inscribed with his name confirm (Aldrete 2006, 198-200.) By this view, consulting the Sibylline books was equivalent to throwing up one's hands and calling on the gods (or, for the skeptical, just performing an empty ritual) to do the impossible in controlling the Tiber. For Bosworth, who criticizes Tacitus for always assuming hostility between Gallus and Tiberius, the proposal of 15 CE was mundane and trivial: "Gallus' suggestion was normal procedure, it would seem, and entirely appropriate in the mouth of a member of the *XVviri sacris faciundis*" (Bosworth 1977, 175). Tacitus was inventing conflict where there was none. Gallus was not making a political statement; he was simply doing what was expected of him as a priest and leading senator. Tiberius' refusal, likewise, was perfectly reasonable (not all floods were prodigies) and must have been grounded in his own experience as a *quindecimvir*. (We have evidence of Tiberius' membership in this priesthood only from 27 CE, but it is likely that he joined the college long before. Augustus had held memberships in every major priesthood. See Rüpke 2005, 886 no. 1215.)

This paper offers a new explanation for Gallus' proposal: that it was a significant political gesture, but one intended to support, not undermine, the emperor. Prodigy reports had virtually ended under Augustus, so that the recommendation to consider the floods a prodigy was in fact both meaningful and radical. Although Tacitus typically (and misleadingly, as Bosworth has shown) depicts Gallus in conflict with Tiberius, this proposal was not meant to antagonize the emperor (See also Shannon-Henderson 2019, 29). On the contrary, it aimed at a mutually beneficial relationship between the *princeps* and the Senate. By analyzing a singular incident at the beginning of Tiberius' reign, this paper aims to address two larger issues of the early principate: 1) the marked decline in prodigy reports and expiations, and 2) the political relationship between Tiberius and Asinius Gallus.

Bibliography

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