

Imperial Fear in the *Historia Augusta*

In the Life of Tacitus from the *Historia Augusta*, the author describes a rare moment of domestic tranquility during the supposed interregnum preceding Tacitus' elevation to the throne. In this moment when the empire was stripped of an overarching authority, the senate, people, and military are depicted in concord with one another and within their groups. This peace was brought about not by an external threat of violence, but instead by the recognition of their own powers for harm: *non illi principem quemquam, ut recte facerent, non tribuniciam potestatem formidabant sed—quod est in uita optimum—se timebant* (Tac. 2.2). In the introspective gloom that followed the rash assassination of Aurelian, as the narrator tells it, the Romans discovered a positive fear of themselves.

This paper examines how the author constructs relationships of fear and uses them to characterize the parade of emperors from Hadrian to Numerian. Fear as a governing force looms large over the fields of historiography and rhetoric. In Sallust's *Bellum Catilinae* it was only fear of an external threat that once maintained the moral superiority of the Romans. On the other hand, in the ethical treatises of Aristotle that influenced the oratorical tradition, fear is the antithesis to courage, and stands opposed to virtue. The *Historia Augusta*, straddling these two traditions, must balance the positive, prosocial fear and the negative, cowardly fear. The paper first looks to the historiographic tradition surrounding the collective fear of the foreigner as a positive force, looking at contemporary authors Ammianus, Orosius, and Augustine to show how Sallust's theorem was being employed around the turn of the 5th century A.D. Despite their distance from Sallust, these authors—particularly the Christian authors—maintain the argument that external threats can foster virtue in the state. Next, it turns to a brief discussion of the fear in the context of the cardinal virtues, and their place in rhetorical training of the time.

These traditions help to define how the *HA* establishes the three predominant political arenas where fear operates: fear between nations, fear directed at the emperor, and the emperors' own fears. Because the emperors are the driving characters in the narrative, the role of fear between nations must be recast, else the prosocial fear becomes a personal failing. Instead of focusing on the Romans' fears, therefore, the author instead focuses on their external foes' fear or confidence in the face of individual Roman emperors, maintaining individual virtues without eliminating the social role of national foes. This in turn permits the emperors to be the focus of fear: positive if external to the Roman world, negative if causing turmoil within it. The Roman populace itself becomes a supporting character, whose fear reflects not personal virtues, but the virtue of the imperial office.

The *Life of Tacitus*, therefore, comes as a surprise in the schema of fear, where in the absence of any emperor, the Roman people must once more become the protagonist of the narrative and their fear truly reflects the national character once more. In this moment, the national foe is recognized to be the nation itself, and fear of vice becomes the goad to virtue, inverting the inherited narratives of fear from historiography and rhetoric. By turning the tropes of fear narratives toward the individual characters of the emperors, the author of the *HA* gives the Roman populace an avenue whereby their fear can become prosocial once more after the long degeneration projected from Sallust.