

Tacitus, Tiberius, and Asinius Gallus

Asinius Gallus appears 12 times in Tacitus' extant Tiberian books, more than anyone besides Sejanus and members of the imperial family. He acts as a foil to Tiberius, bringing out his worst qualities of dissimulation and tyrannical control. A longtime enemy of the princeps, he treads a slow but direct path to a brutal death. Tacitus' account of Gallus' actions has influenced other ancient sources, and it continues to influence modern scholarship. But decades ago, Bosworth (1977) called this portrait into question. Not only is it inconsistent – Gallus oscillates between flattery and hostility – but it is also implausible. Can we really believe that he worked to undermine Tiberius for 16 years with impunity, or that Tacitus had credible sources for deep hatreds harbored in secret or furtive looks that exposed the emperor's hidden fury? Or that a man who owed his position to the principate - his father Asinius Pollio had been a *novus homo* - and whose sons received numerous honors during Tiberius' reign, was an unflagging enemy of the emperor? Bosworth argues that this conflict was invented by Tacitus or his sources, owing to the fates of Gallus and two of his sons (the younger Asinius Gallus was exiled for conspiring against Claudius in 46 CE; his brother Ser. Asinius Celer was killed under Claudius, though the reason is not certain. On their fates, see Dio 60.27.5-6, Suet. *Claud.* 13.2, and Sen. *Apoc.* 13.5.) He suggests that if we examine Gallus' actions without Tacitus' bias, we are left with a completely different view of the senator not as an enemy of the emperor, but as an ally.

In this paper, I will expand on Bosworth's arguments to present a more credible and coherent picture of Gallus. Bosworth shows very clearly what Gallus was *not* (a lifelong enemy of Tiberius), but I hope to reveal more of what he truly was: a leading consular who desired a mutually beneficial relationship between the emperor and the Senate. I will summarize all of

Gallus' recorded actions but will select a few for closer attention: Tiberius' accession to power in 14 CE (Tac. *Ann.* 1.12.2; I will rely on the arguments of A. J. Woodman (1998) and A. Pettinger (2012) for this section), the controversy in 15 CE over punishing actors who abused magistrates (Tac. *Ann.* 1.77.3), the debate over sumptuary legislation in 16 CE (Tac. *Ann.* 2.33.4), and the question in the same year of whether to suspend senatorial business in Tiberius' absence (Tac. *Ann.* 2.35.2). I will also examine the circumstances of Gallus' imprisonment in 30 CE and his death three years later. The portion of Tacitus' *Annals* dealing with his imprisonment is lost, but the story can be found in Cassius Dio's *Histories* (Cass. Dio 58.3.1-3 in Xiph. and *EV* Dio 191).

I will disagree with Bosworth on one key point: there is no need to assume that Gallus and Tiberius were in league, and that Gallus proposed outrageous ideas in the Senate just so that Tiberius would have the opportunity to turn them down. I will argue, instead, that Gallus' proposals were reasonable and sincere anticipations of the Senate's and the emperor's needs, and that when Tiberius rejected them, there were other explanations besides either a conflict or compact between the two men. And I will help to elucidate Gallus' downfall. The standard view is that this had been approaching for years. There is truth to this, but not in the way most scholars understand it. It was not a matter of the sudden flare-up of a rage that had long smoldered in Tiberius. Instead, it was a consequence of Gallus' longtime effort to lift himself and the Senate up through a close connection to the emperor. He had succeeded in this for many years, but by 30 CE circumstances had changed: Tiberius was no longer in Rome, and Gallus made the fatal (though understandable) error of seeking closer ties with the nearest source of power - Sejanus. For the role of Sejanus in Tiberius' principate, I will rely heavily on the work of A. Birley (2007), E. Champlin (2012), and E. Köstner (2020).

Bibliography

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