

TIBERIUS DOWN THE LINE

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Throughout history, men have fought over the question of who would be the next one to rule over ancestral territory. History is filled with stories of people who wanted so badly to be “king” or “emperor” that they tried every ploy that they could think of to attain those positions of supreme power. Usually, the rewards associated with being the sole person in charge of an immense mass of people and land are considered to be so great that few who had either been born into it, or been thrust into by the whims of chance, ever refused it or tried to find some way to avoid the responsibility. However, this does not mean that there were not exceptions to this rule. But refusing to serve as the sole ruler of a given state is not always a practical option. Clearly, Tiberius (42 B.C.E.-37 C.E.), Rome’s second emperor (r.14-37 C.E.), fought his appointment as his step-father Augustus’ replacement as ruler of the Roman possessions as much as anyone in history has ever fought any forced assumption of responsibilities that entirely conflict with their basic natures and desires in life. But, due to the realities of the Roman political state immediately following the death of Augustus in 14 C.E., namely the fact that had Tiberius refused to serve as emperor, civil war would have broken out almost immediately, refusing the position was hardly an option.

So, after only a short time dragging his heels and trying to will away the inevitable, Tiberius gave up protesting his selection for the position and allowed himself to be called emperor of Rome. But, if he had only known the way that the scholars and writers were going to continuously appraise and reappraise their assessments of every little detail of his day-to-day existence, often completely re-slanting a previous author’s interpretation of a given event that occurred during his reign to justify their own personal ambitions and objectives, he might have been so disgusted by the whole mess that he would have been inspired to find some way to make the old Republic work again.

One of the problems with examining the historiography of a figure from ancient history, such as Tiberius, is that modern scholars do not have all the pieces needed to complete the puzzle. They do not have all the sources needed to understand the entire history of Tiberius. We know that Tacitus (c.55-c.117 C.E.) and Suetonius (69-140 C.E.) had access to the same books and documents and that each author used these sources to create a version of Tiberius which suited his own particular purposes and reason for having chosen to write history; but, usually, we do not know what the titles of these sources were, or who wrote them. And when we do know these things about an ancient’s sources, we almost never have those sources to consult because, most likely, the last human to lay eyes on them was a churchman like Otto, bishop of Freising who, as a historian in the Middle Ages, tried to preserve every scrap of ancient knowledge that he could--but did not succeed.¹

¹ Otto’s birthdate is disputed. It is variously given as somewhere between 1105 and 1111. We do, however, know that his The Two Cities was composed from 1143 to 1147 C.E. and that The Deeds of Frederick Barbarossa cuts off with his death in 1158.

For instance, we know that both Tacitus and Suetonius used information from Tiberius' own autobiography when they wrote their histories because both mentions it in the course of his work--but where that autobiography has gone is anyone's guess. Modern historians, like Frank Burr Marsh and Barbara Levick, are therefore forced to recreate their particular versions of Tiberius from atrociously incomplete accounts which many agree are barely even worth the label of "history" as we now use it because these works are often little more than thinly disguised vehicles for their author's own personal objectives and biases.²

To understand Tacitus' account of Tiberius, for instance, it is necessary, first, to understand a few facts about Tacitus himself. This is because most scholars now believe that the historian had a strong personal grudge against Tiberius³ which can only be adequately explained by examining a few key details of Tacitus' own history.

Whether or not Tacitus was a part of the noble Roman aristocracy by birth is still a point of debate; but it hardly matters because by marrying the daughter of Julius Agricola he became, if nothing else, an aristocrat by association. He soon came to the attention of the emperor Vespasian (r.69-79 C.E.) and was made a candidate for the questorship. He served in this office under the emperor Titus (r.79-81 C.E.) then became a praetor during Domition's reign (81-96 C.E.). Next, he spent several years in the provinces. When he returned to Rome, he was just in time to become an involuntary participant in the emperor Domition's final acts of terror. Apparently, as a member of the senate who valued his own life, Tacitus had no choice but to vote to condemn to execution many members of the aristocracy who were innocent of every crime except having a fortune that Domition coveted.⁴ Witnessing this abuse of the law of treason had a major effect on Tacitus and his hatred of the emperors and their abuses can only be understood once his hatred of one particular emperor, Domition, is acknowledged.⁵ This is important to understand because it this hatred of the emperors that drove him to write a chronological history of all their misdeeds.⁶

² For a discussion of the various ways that Tacitus has "obvious defects" as a historian, see: Harold Mattingly. "Introduction" Tacitus: The Agricola and The Germania (New York: Viking Penguin, 1986), 11.

³ As Charles Edward Smith says in Tiberius and the Roman Empire (Port Washington, New York: Kennikat, 1972): "In the main, Tacitus' attempts to blacken the reputation of Tiberius are the result of his bias against the principate," 160.

⁴ Mattingly, 40.

⁵ In the Agricola, Tacitus illustrates this point nicely by saying: "The worst of our torments under Domition was to see him with his eyes fixed upon us. Every sigh was registered against us; and when we all turned pale, he did not scruple to make us marked men by a glance of his savage countenance--that blood-red countenance which saved him from ever being seen to blush with shame," Chapter 45.

⁶ Sir Ronald Syme suggests in Tacitus (Oxford: Clarendon, 1958) that Tacitus had ambiguous feelings about the emperors which was brought about by his association with the senate. On the one hand, Tacitus longed for the Republic; but he also understood that it was ridiculous to imagine that it could ever

Tacitus says in the opening chapter of his Annals: “my purpose is to relate a few facts about Augustus—more particularly his last acts, then the reign of Tiberius, and all which follows, without either bitterness or partiality, from any motives to which I am far removed.”⁷ Then he goes on to completely disregard this guideline that he has given himself—it is now believed that his critique of Tiberius is always bitter and designed to further his own motives. He dispenses with his “few facts” about Augustus (r.27 B.C.E.-14 C.E.) in just five paragraphs and then his scathing review of the “abuses” of Tiberius takes up almost the entire length of the rest of his work. This is because Tacitus saw Augustus and Tiberius in a completely different way than we might expect. Because Augustus always maintained the illusion that he was just the “Princeps,” that is to say, “the first among equals” and continued to have his powers reinvested in himself by the senate at regular intervals, Tacitus did not see him as we do today. For Tacitus, Augustus was just, as Julius Caesar (b.100 B.C.E.-d.44 B.C.E.) still is to us, a bridge between the Republic and the Empire: Tiberius, then, who maintained none of the illusions that Augustus was so careful to keep up, was, in Tacitus’ mind, the real founder of the Empire and, as such, became the epitome of all that was wrong with the system.

From the very beginning of his discussion of Tiberius, it is easy to see that Tacitus is determined to paint as bleak a picture of the emperor as possible. This is especially apparent in the way that he shifts the focus of his discussion from Augustus to Tiberius: “. . . the same report told men that Augustus was dead and that Tiberius Nero was master of the state. The first crime of the new reign was the murder of Postumus Agrippa.”⁸

From the very first moment that we meet Tiberius, we are forced to see him as evil. Today, it is generally believed that Tiberius not only had nothing to do with the execution of Postumus but did everything in his power to see that those who were guilty of the crime were punished.⁹ Tacitus deliberately obscures the facts so that his portrayal of Tiberius can begin as badly as possible. And this continues throughout his history: deliberately selecting only the facts that will back up the point that he is trying to make and letting all contradictory evidence remain unmentioned—or, if he does mention it, presenting it in such a way that Tiberius looks as bad as possible. Continuing with the Postumus example, for instance, we are told by Tacitus that even though Augustus had problems with Postumus Agrippa, and that even though he might have had him banished to an island because of his displeasure with his character,¹⁰ he was not the type to give an order that one

work again. Nor does he long for a “better” type of emperor exactly, because “[benevolent] despotism enfeebles the will and blunts intelligence,” 547. Instead, he seems to favor, in his desire for a better type of ruler, “the ideal of the middle path, liberty but not license, discipline but not enslavement,” 548.

⁷ Tacitus, Annals, I, 1.

⁸ *ibid.*, 5-6.

⁹ Frank Burr Marsh, The Reign of Tiberius (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1931), 50.

¹⁰ Many historians have speculated that Postumus might have been mad or, at least, highly unstable. See also Robin Seagar, Tiberius (Berkeley: U of California Press, 1972), 46, for a discussion of

of his own family members should be murdered. Tacitus tells us that Tiberius would have been more than happy to commit such a crime:

Beyond a doubt, Augustus had often complained of the young man's character, and had thus succeeded in obtaining the sanction of a decree of the senate for his banishment. But he never was hard-hearted enough to destroy any of his kinsfolk, nor was it credible that death was to be the sentence of the grandson in order that the stepson might feel secure. It was more probable that Tiberius and Livia, the one from fear, the other from a stepmother's enmity, hurried on the destruction of a youth whom they suspected and hated.¹¹

For Tacitus, the fact that not everyone in the world wants to be the ruler of Rome was such a completely unfathomable concept that he could only assume that Tiberius' initial reluctance to assume the full powers of the emperorship was nothing more than a thinly disguised way to root out his enemies among the senators and aristocracy. He also suggested the possibility that Tiberius could have been motivated by a concern for public opinion:

[He wished] to have the credit of having been called and elected by the state rather than of having crept into power through the intrigues of a wife and a dotard's adoption. It was subsequently understood that he assumed a wavering attitude, to test likewise the temper of the nobles. For he would twist a word or a look into a crime and treasure it up in his memory.¹²

Sometimes, this tendency to hold Tiberius personally responsible for every event that occurred during his reign becomes almost silly. Tacitus even blames him for creating many of the problems that plagued the Empire during Tacitus's own lifetime. This is easy to see in the way that Tacitus makes Tiberius responsible for the revolt of the military which occurred shortly after Tiberius' ascension. The commander, Junius Blaesus, gave his men a day off to celebrate the beginning of Tiberius' reign (or, Tacitus remarks, to mourn the end of the reign of Augustus) and Tacitus cites this incident as the "beginning of demoralization of the troops, of quarreling, of listening to the talk of every pestilent fellow, in short, of craving for luxury and idleness and loathing discipline and toil."¹³ Tacitus is really going out of his way to pin an existing social problem of his own time on Tiberius. The men mutiny and get their leader (Blaesus) to listen to them and make accommodations to their demands

how Postumus was of "low intelligence and uncouth disposition."

¹¹ Tacitus *Annals*, I, 6.

¹² *Ibid.*, 7. It is also interesting to note the way that the last sentence of this passage echoes the selection from the *Agricola* quoted in note 4.

¹³ *ibid.*, 16

and then, after word gets around that this has worked, others get the idea that it is profitable to mutiny and a whole string of these things break out; and Tacitus would have us believe that none of this would ever have happened if Tiberius had not been promoted to emperor. He does this even though he is aware of the real complaints of the mutinous men because he lists their demands and the real reasons for their revolt in a later passage.¹⁴ Clearly, he is choosing to present this incident in a way that further slanders Tiberius.

Tacitus continues his chronology of the reign of Tiberius in this fashion until the reader is convinced that Tiberius is the worst thing that ever happened to Rome. And he does this even though there are plenty of other events that occurred during the twenty-three-year reign of Tiberius that Tacitus could have made into his ultimate evils of Roman history. Take, for instance, the intricate machinations of a man who did want, more than anything else in the world, to be the sole ruler of Rome: Lucius Aelius Sejanus (d.31 C.E.) Although Sejanus was so convincing in his deceitful practices that he could remain Tiberius' close personal friend and advisor even after he had secretly poisoned his son, Drusus, Tacitus pins all the blame for Sejanus' actions on Tiberius. This is not only because the emperor had befriended him, but if the reclusive Tiberius would only have been in Rome more, rather than hiding out in his island retreat, Sejanus would never been able to abuse the Roman state in the way that he did.

Tacitus even finds a way to make Tiberius' own society hold him responsible for the abuses of Sejanus. Once it became known that Sejanus had either killed or put out of commission several others whom he believed could come between him and the highest seat in the Empire, all those who had struggled to be his friends during his days of glory began to come under suspicion even though they had immediately abandoned him once the extent of his atrocities became common knowledge. Tacitus shows us the way that one knight, Marcus Terentius, defended himself by bravely addressing the senate and pinpointing the "real cause" of the "Sejanus problem":

It was really not Sejanus of Vulsinii, it was a member of the Claudian and Julian houses, in which he had taken a position by his marriage-alliance, it was your son-in-law, Caesar, your partner in the consulship, the man who administered your political functions, whom we courted. It is not for us to criticize one whom you may raise above all others, or your motives for so doing. Heaven has intrusted you with the supreme decision of affairs, and for us is left the glory of obedience. And, again, we see what takes place before our eyes, who it is on whom you bestow riches and honors, who are the most powerful to help or to injure. That Sejanus was such, no one will deny. To explore the prince's secret thoughts, or any of his hidden plans, is a forbidden, a dangerous thing, nor does it follow that one could reach them.¹⁵

¹⁴ See Tacitus, *Annals*, I, 26, 31, 34, and 37, for Tacitus' more complete history of these events.

¹⁵Tacitus, *Annals*, VI, 8.

The tendency to make Tiberius into the worst evil that Rome ever faced continues throughout the entire length of Tacitus' extremely thorough probe into the emperor's career. Therefore, when his last words on his subject do finally come around, the reader is not too surprised that they are, in essence, just one final jab against the person who Tacitus holds responsible for every crime of every emperor who would follow: "... he was infamous for his cruelty, though he veiled his debaucheries, while he loved or feared Sejanus. Finally, he plunged into every wickedness and disgrace, when fear and shame being cast off, he simply indulged his own inclinations."¹⁶

Another writer, Suetonius, handled his examination of the Tiberius in an entirely different manner. In fact, if Suetonius and Tacitus were not contemporaries one would almost be forced to claim that Suetonius must have used Tacitus' mentioning of Tiberius' "wickedness and disgrace" and his tendency to "indulge his own inclinations" as his jumping off point for the ideas about the emperor that he was determined to propagate.

Just as it was necessary to begin a discussion of Tacitus' account of Tiberius with an examination of Tacitus himself, it is also necessary to begin the discussion of Suetonius in the same way. It is important to realize that Suetonius was not, exactly, a historian as we understand the word today. He was a popular writer. A simple examination of the titles of some of his other books, none of which still exist, will prove this. Besides the Twelve Caesars, he also wrote books like Lives of Famous Whores, Illustrious Writers, Roman Dress, Physical Defects of Mankind, and Greek Terms of Abuse. Unlike Tacitus, he was not writing to fulfill the conditions of a personal vendetta; but he was writing with a specific goal in mind just the same. He chose to write a national history for the simple fact that Rome's twelve Caesars are almost guaranteed to provide him with a lively subject. Put bluntly, Suetonius was not just writing to record his country's history: he was writing to entertain. In fact, if he were around today he would almost certainly be labeled a hack. It soon becomes apparent to anyone who takes the time to compare Suetonius' accounts of the lives of the emperors with any other ancient source that he was clearly more of a sensational biographer than he was anything else. Obviously, he did not care as much about the "truth" of what he was saying as he did about the effect his words produced.

Suetonius begins his examination of Tiberius in the same way that he begins all his portraits of the emperors, on a positive note. In fact, because he always follows this set pattern in his writings, scholar Arnaldo Momigliano suggests that he "was under the influence of an antiquarian approach to biography"¹⁷ and defines the formula that he consistently follows as "the combination of a tale in chronological order with the systematic characterization of an individual and his achievements."¹⁸ Therefore, it is not surprising

¹⁶ Ibid., 51.

¹⁷ The "antiquarian tradition" mentioned is, primarily, the Greek tradition. See: Arnaldo Momigliano. The Development of Greek Biography (Cambridge: Harvard, 1993), 20.

¹⁸ Ibid., 18. He goes on to say that, as such, the biographies of Suetonius are more suited to literary

that he begins by talking about how Tiberius came from the Claudian family in two different ways and was therefore doubly noble and highly suited to be emperor. Then he states that Tiberius was a precocious statesman and how he gave his first public address at his father's funeral when he was only nine years old. By the time he is thirteen, he has become the leader of his peers; and when he comes of age, he proves himself to be generous by staging a huge gladiatorial contest with lavish prizes. He marries Vipsania Agrippina and has a son, Drusus, but this is where the positive side of Tiberius ends.

Because Augustus has other plans for him, he is soon forced to divorce the wife he loves and marry Augustus' trampish daughter, Julia. Suetonius tells us that:

Tiberius took this very ill. He loved Vipsania and strongly disapproved of Julia, realizing, like everyone else, that she had felt an adulterous passion for him while still married to his father-in-law Agrippa. Tiberius continued to regret the divorce so heartily that when, one day, he accidentally caught sight of Vipsania and followed her with tears in his eyes and an intense unhappiness written on his face, precautions were taken against his ever seeing her again.¹⁹

Unlike Tacitus' account, in which Augustus made Tiberius his heir because he had no choice in the matter; in Suetonius, Augustus actually liked Tiberius before he decided that he might make a good emperor. The reader is provided with excerpt after excerpt from several letters of Augustus that praise Tiberius for this or that worthy accomplishment. In this way, Suetonius gets his readers to really like Tiberius--and then he pulls the rug out from under them.

Once Tiberius is in office his true nature begins to show itself. Suetonius accuses Tiberius of disguising his evil from the beginning. As an example, Suetonius says that, as a young officer, Tiberius had earned such a reputation for heavy drinking that his name, Tiberius Claudius Nero, began to be replaced with the nickname "Biberius Caldius Mero," which, in Latin, means "Drinker of hot wine with no water added."²⁰ This is made even worse by the fact that once he is emperor, he quickly promotes his drinking buddies to high offices.²¹ In fact, his true vices instantly take over to the point that he even establishes a heretofore unknown and unnecessary government office: Comptroller of Pleasures.²²

Suetonius claims that even Tiberius' refusal to accept the title of "Father of his

figures and were just a further use by Suetonius of a technique that he learned during the course of writing his *Illustrious Writers*. Momigliano then decides that the pattern followed by Plutarch: "a straightforward account of events," is more suited to the type of subject that Suetonius had chosen to portray (see page 19).

¹⁹ Suetonius *Tiberius* 7.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 42

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*

Country” was something that he did for the good of Rome because he knew his own tendencies and knew just how much he would abuse the title once he got it.²³ In fact, there are so many abuses of power in this text that it soon becomes necessary to steal a line from Suetonius himself and say that: “A detailed list of Tiberius’ barbarities would take a long time to compile; I shall content myself with a few samples.”²⁴

Suetonius tells us that Tiberius’ retirements to his island home of Caprae were not something that he necessarily did because the strain of governing Rome, the strain of “holding the wolf by the ears,”²⁵ was too much for him--but because it was only on this island that all of Tiberius’ true depravities could be freely exercised. So widely known was this trait, according to Suetonius, that island itself began to be commonly referred to not as Caprae, but as “Caprinium,” which basically meant that it was the “Old Goat’s Island.”²⁶

Suetonius then goes into great lengths to describe all of Tiberius’ alleged sexual practices until the effect of all this is simply overwhelming for his reader--but even Suetonius apparently has limits to what he can report and we know that Tiberius has thoroughly stretched them because he tells us:

Some aspects of his criminal obscenity are almost too vile to discuss, much less believe. Imagine training little boys, whom he called his ‘minnows’ to chase him while he went swimming and get between his legs and lick and nibble him. Or letting babies not yet weaned from their mother’s breast suck at his breast or groin--such a filthy old man he had become.²⁷

And the list does not stop there but continues on for several pages. But what is worse is the way that Tiberius abuses his political power just as much as he excersizes his sexual depravity.

Tiberius soon begins a reign of terror that is more like something we would expect from Domition than from the Tiberius that we have come to know from Tacitus’ work. He begins to abuse both his own family and the noble families of Rome to such an extent that no one is safe and no one knows who will be next. He will kill anyone for any crime he can dream up to satisfy his urge to see death and torture all around him.²⁸ He is a tyrant both

²³ Ibid., 67.

²⁴ Ibid., 61.

²⁵ Ibid., 25.

²⁶ Ibid., 43.

²⁷ Ibid., 44.

²⁸ “Not a day, however holy, passed without an execution; he even desecrated New Year’s Day.” Ibid., 61.

to Romans and to visiting foreigners without discretion.²⁹ In fact, things soon became so bad in Rome that Suetonius tells us that:

People could now be executed for beating a slave, or changing their own clothes, close to an image of Augustus, or for carrying a ring or coin, bearing Augustus' head, into a lavatory or brothel or for criticizing anything Augustus had ever said or done. The climax came when a man died merely for letting an honor be voted to him by his native town council on the same day that honors had once been voted to Augustus. Tiberius did so many other wicked deeds under the pretext of reforming public morals--but in reality to gratify his lust for seeing people suffer--that many satires were written against the evils of the day, incidentally expressing gloomy fears about the future.³⁰

Suetonius claims that these abuses continued up to the very end of Tiberius' life. He says that everyone in Rome suffered so greatly under his cruel hands that "the first news of his death caused such joy at Rome that people ran about yelling: 'To the Tiber with Tiberius!' and others offered prayers to Mother Earth and the Infernal Gods to give him no home below except among the damned."³¹ But, as interesting as Suetonius' account of Tiberius might be, historians today believe that there is really very little real substance to it and that most of its more outrageous parts are far more likely to be products of Suetonius' imagination than they are to be events that really occurred.

In 1931, historian Frank Burr Marsh tried to get to the truth about Tiberius by constantly asking the question: "If Tiberius was not really as black as he has been painted, how did it come about that he was so misrepresented?"³² He came to his conclusions by going back to the texts and trying to see if the incidents that are presented in them conflict in any way with the slant that the ancient authors are trying to give them. Basically, it is his discussion of Tacitus and his motives that make up the ideas that are expressed in the first few paragraphs of this essay's Tacitus section. He decides that if there was any truth to most of the anecdotes that Suetonius presents, these incidences would surely not have been passed up by Tacitus who was more than willing to throw anything into his discussion of Tiberius that could have made Tiberius look as bad as possible. The difference is that Tacitus never resorted to making up his examples whereas Suetonius never hesitated to do so whenever he needed to illustrate some particular point.³³ He tells us:

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 56.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 58-59.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 75.

³² Marsh, 1.

³³ *Ibid.* 274.

For any serious study of the period we can neither trust Suetonius nor ignore him. He is a good witness as to the view of Tiberius prevalent among the Romans after the emperor's death, and we may accept, though with some caution, such of his stories as fit into the framework of facts furnished by Tacitus. General statements which are not sustained by Tacitus must be disregarded entirely, and, where Tacitus and Suetonius differ, we should follow Tacitus unless there are good reasons for thinking that on the particular point in question Suetonius happens to have reproduced a more reliable authority.³⁴

But perhaps it seems a bit pedantic to focus on Marsh's methodology in such detail--it is not, because it is only by understanding the historian, his goals, and his reasons for writing that we are able to understand why his version of the story looks the way it does. Marsh's Tiberius, for instance, is formed by his re-examination of the standard sources for Tiberius's history; not just Tacitus and Suetonius, but Dio Cassius and Josephus and a small handful of others. He sets himself the goal of finding conflicts among these sources that allow Tiberius to be re-envisioned from a "modern" perspective. In Marsh's eyes, therefore, Tiberius soon loses his evil edge and becomes a magnificent leader who was willing to sacrifice everything for the good of his country.

In Marsh's interpretation, all of Tiberius's stalling around before he agreed to take on the responsibilities of Empire were nothing less than an attempt on his part to find some way of really making the Republic work again. Marsh suggests that he only agreed to accept the title and the position once it became clear to him that nothing short of the one man rule that Augustus had introduced would suffice to keep the noble families of Rome from tearing the Empire to shreds.³⁵ He claims that Tiberius constantly tried to reform his government--but the senate just would not let him change Rome in any fundamental way and he was forced to live out the rest of his life as a reluctant emperor because those beneath him simply did not have his strength of vision.³⁶ Consequently, a friction developed between Tiberius and the senate. He alienated most of the aristocracy as well. His repeated attempts to make the government work explain the picture of him that Tacitus and Suetonius were able to create simply by relying on the still disgruntled family memories of the descendents of those aristocrats and senators not even a hundred years later. But, Marsh demands that we try to view the events of Tiberius' reign without bias and by the end of his book decides that: "If we look at Tiberius as he appeared to all the world except the conscript fathers and the populace of Rome, it will be difficult, if not impossible, to deny his claim to a place among the best and greatest of the emperors."³⁷

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 277.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 16.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 228.

So, by this point, it becomes almost impossible to formulate a true picture of an ancient figure like Tiberius because the versions of him that we have are constantly being added to and re-evaluated. It seems sometimes like any author can just take Tiberius and make him into whatever he or she will. Take, for instance, the example of Barbara Levick's Tiberius The Politician, published in 1976. Perhaps the best definition of this work is to call it a "uniquely postmodern perspective" because it takes so many of the standard things that we assume are basic truths about Tiberius and turns them on their heads. Instead of the man who fought tooth and nail to be allowed to do anything but be emperor, Levick presents someone who is completely opposite this stereotype. Her version of Tiberius was constantly and consciously scraping his way to the top. He still hesitates in accepting the Principate--the position he has been fighting all his life to obtain--but here it is only because the circumstances warrant this course of action and he is struggling to define that position to himself and determine just what his powers are. In fact, Tiberius, in this book, is so bent on achieving the ultimate position of power in the Roman world that he never even bats an eye when he is ordered to divorce Vipsania for Julia--after all this just brings him one step closer to the power that he craves so badly. Astoundingly, Levick makes this claim even though it is a key feature of all ancient and modern portrayals of Tiberius and one of the best reasons that Suetonius gives for the way that Tiberius later behaves. She even goes so far as to claim that "sentiment over his regret for Vipsania is out of place. He was a free agent, acting as thousands of Romans had acted before him: for political reasons."³⁸

Levick continues her attack on all previous scholars of Tiberius by correcting the idea that Augustus had just appointed Tiberius to be the "regent" who would hold the position of emperor until Gaius and Lucius came of age. This idea, she claims, is completely out of place in any examination of Tiberius because it is an idea that is more appropriate to more recent monarchies than it is to Rome.³⁹ Likewise she criticizes the ancient view that Augustus had only selected Tiberius to be the next Princeps because all the other, "better," choices had died off:

Imperium was conferred for use, not show, and it could be used to secure an indefinite number of renewals; nor was there any global monarchical power which could be conferred on a "guardian." If Tiberius was advanced to a position of unassailable power, the step was virtually irrevocable and power would last, if he chose, for the rest of his life.⁴⁰

She also believes that Augustus could hardly have risen to the position of power that he held in Rome if he was as prone to make bad character decisions as the ancients would have us

³⁷ Ibid., 229.

³⁸ Barbara Levick Tiberius The Politician (London: Thames and Hudson, 1976), 37.

³⁹ Ibid., 31

⁴⁰ Ibid., 31-2.

believe. Tacitus, she claims, would have had just as much evidence to compare Tiberius to Hadrian (b.76-d.138 C.E.), if he had wanted to, as he did to Domitian. His love of things Greek and his determination to hold the empire to its existing borders are two examples she gives.⁴¹ He simply chose to make Tiberius look as bad as possible because he, personally, did not like the system that Tiberius represented. She echoes Syme by suggesting that this was partly due to his senatorial position, but goes on to say that the sources he used were also "disparate in nature, scope, and veracity."⁴² Furthermore, she claims that even if he had examined all the transcriptions of Tiberius' speeches that he could find and questioned all the senators that he could find whose fathers and grandfathers had sat on the senate while Tiberius was in power, that he still would not have been able to give us an accurate portrait of Tiberius because his own, personal failings often got in his way:

That Tacitus' portrait is not a convincing whole--more of an expressionist sketch--is a measure of the disparity of the sources and of his honesty in handling them, but also of his impatience of routine detail, of his inability to resist the epigrammatic but misleading punch-line, of his taste for satire (both traits he shared with his subject).⁴³

Also of interest is her claim that both Tacitus and Suetonius were far too willing to include gossip and select pieces of the oral tradition in their portraits because they were more interested in fostering the development of scandal than they were of portraying Tiberius as he really was.⁴⁴

Levick justifies the way that Tiberius was later perceived as a cruel and harsh tyrant by blaming the senate for much of the undeniable evil that happened during his reign. The senate is to blame for all the atrocities that Tacitus and Suetonius cite--not the emperor. In her opinion, Tiberius is to be blamed more for allowing the senate to conduct its own business without interfering than he is for being personally evil. In fact, it is even a positive point on his behalf, because this is a clear indication that he was deliberately trying to restore at least some of the decision-making power in Rome to the senate. It is necessary that we see Tiberius as having an extremely limited position throughout the *Maiestas* trials, the mass-murder of the wealthy and the seizure of their personal property, that occurred during his stint as emperor. He had an extremely limited ability to do anything to stop the senate from doing as it pleased in these matters. Levick tells us that, if anything, Tiberius tried to tame the senate's innate tendency to bring charges against its own members because, as time goes on, fewer and fewer of the accused were executed and many more were merely

⁴¹ Ibid., 222.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid., 222-3.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

imprisoned. She suggests that junior senators had much to gain from successful accusations of their peers--up to one fourth of the accused person's property and possibly even an advancement to the "traitor's" rank were possible "rewards" for bringing an enemy of the state to light. She further points out the facts that the *Maiestas* trials did not end with the death of Tiberius but continued into the reigns of both Claudius (r.41-54 C.E.) and Nero (r.54-68 C.E.)--and that the extremely cruel penalties which Tiberius was accused of having devised for his own twisted purposes were nothing more than standard punishments that were used in the Republic. She even suggests that the senators might often have tried to outdo each other with the severity of their punishments in order to adequately express the horror that they felt over the crime that had been committed. And she concludes by telling us:

The inherent faults of the senatorial court are obvious. How far they had developed before Tiberius took over the administration is not clear because the evidence is lacking. The court's essentially political nature and its docility, its ability to accept new charges as well as those on the statute book, its fluid procedure, its freedom to take charges separately or together, to alter penalties and rewards, its uncertain role, doubling court of law and legislative body, all are pernicious failings that emerge to daylight in the pages of Tacitus, Dio, Suetonius, and, for a much later period, Pliny.⁴⁵

But even Barbara Levick's radical departure from all the standard features of Tiberian historiography can not compare with the unique perspective of one of the medieval world's most illustrious historians: Otto, Bishop of Freising. Unlike the others in this list, Otto never intended for Tiberius to be the center of any real part of his discussion because his scope is simply too large to go into detail on any one person in the way that any of the other authors that we have examined so far do. He is writing a Universal History with a teleological perspective. His purpose for writing is almost indoctrinary. The account he gives of Tiberius is little more than an interesting anecdote in a much larger story--but, what an interesting anecdote it is.

It seems perfectly logical that a medieval historian like Otto would choose to examine the life of Tiberius, because he was emperor during the most significant events in the life of Jesus, having taken the Principate when Jesus was somewhere around fourteen years old. Therefore, given the way that Tacitus and other historians that Otto would have read, especially Suetonius, treat Tiberius and his alleged depravity, one would expect that Otto would cite such behavior as a reason why Jesus had to come to earth when he did. But this is not the way that Otto treats his subject at all.

He begins his account of Tiberius by telling us that he was the best of all possible

⁴⁵ The information in this paragraph is a condensed, and slightly re-ordered version of Levick's Eleventh Chapter: "Tiberius and the Law: The Development of *Maiestas*." The quoted material is from 199-200.

rulers. In fact, he was even generous to a fault. Otto cites several incidences where those who were brought to trial before him for one crime or another learned that "Tiberius was indeed merciful but lax in his punishment of evildoers, a fault of almost all clement judges."⁴⁶ Tiberius even refused to raise taxes in Rome and the Provinces despite the urgings of the senate, because "it is the duty of a good shepherd to sheer his flock, not to eat it up."⁴⁷ But everything changed after Jesus was crucified.⁴⁸

According to Otto, as soon as Pontius Pilate began to hear about the way that Jesus had come back from the dead after being crucified by his own troops, he was so astounded that he checked into the life of Jesus and decided that Rome did, indeed, have a new god in its midst:

After the resurrection and ascension of the Lord, Pilate wrote to Tiberius Caesar concerning His life, His miracles, His passion and His resurrection also. Upon hearing this Tiberius brought a proposal before the senate recommending that He should be worshipped among the gods. But the senate refused to ratify Caesar's edict because the case had not been laid before them first; they even voted that all adherents of this name should be extirpated from the city. For this reason the emperor was transformed from a very mild prince into a most savage beast, and ordered a great many of the senators and nobles to be put to death. And so it came to pass that, because they were unwilling to accept Christ as king, they found their king Caesar an avenger.⁴⁹

Thus, according to Otto, Tiberius became the cruel tyrant that Tacitus and Suetonius wrote of because the senate refused to acknowledge Jesus as a deity. His method was simply to take the same basic pattern that the ancient sources gave him, such as the way that Tiberius began his career as a person who was somewhat good and then his evil became apparent after he had been in power for a while, and add his own reasons for why the shift in Tiberius' personality must have occurred.

Therefore, it must be concluded that it is not really possible to know anything certain about an ancient figure given the way that every author who takes up an examination of the subject comes up with almost an entirely different picture than the historians who have gone

⁴⁶ Otto, Bishop of Freising, The Two Cities; reprinted in The Columbia University Records of Civilization series. Austin P. Evans and Charles Knapp eds. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1928), 233.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* This "proof" of Tiberius' inherent goodness is especially interesting because Otto is obviously stealing it almost verbatim from Suetonius and adapting the information that he finds there to suit his own purposes. See Suetonius, Tiberius, 131.

⁴⁸ Or, as Otto puts it: "The Lord deigned to come to His passion and to be crucified" The Two Cities, 235.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 236.

before. Until some major discovery of ancient texts clears up the gaps in the historical record, each individual reader of history and each individual writer of history are forced to formulate their own conclusions. All we can ever know is only a little better than a "best guess." But, history is not done with Tiberius yet. As we continue down the line, we will only continue to look back at Tiberius and rewrite his life to suit our needs. We reshape him every time we think of him; and we do the same with all the characters we know from history. We can never know these people personally, so we create them for ourselves as we try to put what we know of history into perspective.

Therefore, a careful examination of the historiography of Tiberius is just as important as any examination of Tiberius himself because historiography proves that there is nothing solid about the past except the fact that people are repeatedly overwhelmed by the urge to understand the people who have come before them. But, in order to do this, we must also remember that it is equally important to try to understand the people who are telling us the story.