

Hail, Seizer!

Imperial Instability in Ancient Rome

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History 501: Classical World of Greece and Rome

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July 19, 2018

The *Pax Romana* fostered credibility and trust for Rome's emperors; however, the emperors that followed Augustus cruelly chiseled away at that relationship over the course of the Empire's first centuries. While Augustus was "conscientious and lenient," with a "reputation for courage and clemency," and a hatred for "haste and recklessness," many of the individuals who inherited or seized his position became what their forebear abhorred most.¹ The first Roman emperors contributed to Rome's instability through their absence of justice and their abundance of cruelty.

Rome reformed its legal and political system in minor ways through its first centuries, yet many emperors' jurisprudence lacked the thoughtfulness that precedent dictated. When Tiberius first rejected the title "Father of His Country," he claimed to do so because "You can count on the consistency of my behaviour; but I should not like you to set the precedent of binding yourselves to approve a man's every action; for what if something happened to alter that man's character?"² Ironically, this is the same individual who Suetonius says "grew enraged and redoubled his cruelties until nobody was safe from torture and death," ordered capital punishment for a guardsman who stole an imperial peacock, and forbade relatives from mourning their executed family members.³ Whether Tiberius' statement was a prediction of how his view of justice would change or it was a result of other factors, it appeared difficult to have a fair trial under his reign. Claudius also lacked strong judgment, as "sometimes he was wise and prudent, sometimes thoughtless and hasty, sometimes downright foolish and apparently

¹ Suetonius, *The Twelve Caesars*, trans. Robert Graves (New York: Penguin, 1979), 65, 67, 73.

² *Ibid.*, 148.

³ *Ibid.*, 144.

out of his sense.”⁴ His flexibility meant that sometimes criminals were given more lenient punishments, and sometimes they were more severe than the precedent advised. For example, “if anyone were found guilty of some really shocking crime, Claudius exceeded the legal penalty and condemned him to the wild beasts.”⁵ Galba also passed down capital punishment to both leading political figures without evidence or trial.⁶ Surprisingly, Suetonius proffers some respect for Nero’s ability as a judge, taking time to consider separate charges and listening to multiple perspectives.⁷ It reflects the dire straits of Rome’s judicial system if Nero earns praise.

If the emperors were known for administering their own brand of justice, conspirators were no different. Tiberius may have poisoned Caligula’s father’s, as the popular Germanicus would have been a strong contender for emperor, after which, Caligula was rumored to have smothered or poisoned Tiberius, which would be ironic given that Tiberius said of his supposed-assassin, “I am nursing a viper for the Roman people, ... and a Phaethon for the whole world.”⁸ Among the leaders discussed in *The Twelve Caesars*, Augustus, Vespasian, and Titus seem to have died of natural causes, and Nero and Otho both committed suicide. However, Julius Caesar, Caligula, Claudius, Galba, Vietllius, and Domitian were certainly assassinated, with Tiberius’ death still in question.⁹ Even with these risks, emperors also ignored warning signs: Caligula once tossed aside information regarding his safety, “on the ground that nobody could have any

⁴ Ibid., 194.

⁵ Ibid., 193

⁶ Ibid., 255.

⁷ Ibid., 220.

⁸ Ibid., 150, 158.

⁹ F.P. Retief, “Health and Healing: Death and Disease in the Graeco-Roman World, *Acta Theologica Supplementum 7*,” The University of the Free State, 2005, accessed July 19, 2018, file:///C:/Users/Owner/Downloads/52565-81210-1-PB%20(1).pdf

reason to hate him.”¹⁰ This lack of self-awareness demonstrates the overconfidence that came with dictatorial power, and Suetonius observes that the emperors’ “frantic and reckless behaviour roused murderous thoughts in certain minds.”¹¹ On the other hand, Claudius saw danger everywhere, surrounding himself with soldiers at banquets, inspecting beds before getting in them, and taking vengeance upon those from whom he felt any danger.¹² Imperially-sanctioned acts of cruelty may have been due to the constant plots surrounding the emperors, or the constant plots around them may have been due to their cruelty.

Debauchery, excess, and cruelty ran rampant even while the empire prospered. When Augustus died, Rome actively embraced Caligula in its distress, and his young presence, according to Suetonius, calmed the rioting crowds; however, as an adult, the “monster” Caligula terrorized others.¹³ He committed incest, outlawed laughing, bathing, and dining with family after his sister died, and did not just react to problems but actively created them for his own enjoyment, manipulating theater-goers into invading knights’ seats and feeding criminals to the shows’ wild animals.¹⁴ Caligula did not care about the consequences, quoting “Let them hate me, so long as they fear me.”¹⁵ For Claudius, his mother and grandmother treated him cruelly, calling him a monster and a fool, which does not excuse his behavior but provides some understanding for why, as an adult, “his cruelty and bloodthirstiness appeared equally in great and small matters.”¹⁶ Tiberius’

¹⁰ Ibid., 160.

¹¹ Suetonius, 181.

¹² Ibid., 207.

¹³ Suetonius, 163.

¹⁴ Suetonius, 165, 167.

¹⁵ Ibid., 169.

¹⁶ Ibid., 187, 206.

drinking and sexual carousing with girls and young men led to a reputation for “criminal obscenity [that] are almost too vile to discuss, much less believe,” and he often claimed that his actions were in the interest of the public while creating new ways to watch his people suffer.¹⁷ Obscenity, wasteful spending, seducing men, family, and married women, and murdering those who stood in his way were some of the activities that earned Nero his brutal reputation. Winks and Mattern-Parkes assert that both Nero and Domitian “terrorized the senate with bloody purges, motivated by paranoid fears of conspiracy or by greed, as they confiscated the property of their victims.”¹⁸ Like wanton, arrogant teenagers, Rome’s early emperors used peacetime and prosperity as license to indulge their fancies, regardless of who it might negatively affect.

Imperial overconfidence also resulted in minimal respect for Rome’s primary religion, fledgling religion, and religions of conquered territories. For example, Nero inflicted punishments “on the Christians, a sect professing a new and mischievous religious belief.”¹⁹ Caligula prompted violent rebellion in Judea when he disrespected the Jewish population by trying to put his image in The Temple of Jerusalem; “nationalism and resentment of Roman rule were important causes of the revolt.”²⁰ He also disrespected Rome’s religion by placing himself among its gods, conversing with and threatening them in temples as well as building a shrine to himself.²¹ Tiberius also “lacked any deep regard for the gods or other religious feelings, his belief in astrology

¹⁷ Ibid., 135, 142.

¹⁸ Winks, 147.

¹⁹ Ibid., 221.

²⁰ Robin W. Winks and Susan P. Mattern-Parkes, *The Ancient Mediterranean World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 167-168

²¹ Suetonius, 164.

having persuaded him that the world was wholly ruled by fate.”²² He actively suppressed Roman traditions by outlawing soothsayers and attempting to do the same to oracles.²³ While political leaders were content to promote omens that portended their success based on birth dates, eagle landings, and/or weather phenomena, their egotism led them to dismiss the religious beliefs that displeased them. Accordingly, when the sacred chickens gave one of Tiberius’ consuls a displeasing message, the consul threw them in the water and proclaimed, “If they will not eat, let them drink!”²⁴ This religious dismissal disconnected leaders from the Roman people, whose highest praise was deification and whose major buildings and festivals largely revolved around their polytheistic culture.

Suetonius details the troubled leadership that characterized many early emperors even while the empire prospered. What he noted about Caligula could apply to many of the early emperors: he had “two contradictory vices – over-confidence and extreme timorousness.”²⁵ Emperors often acted with disregard to consequence unless it affected them personally, and then they lashed out most strongly against those they feared. Augustus’ goal was “that of being known as the author of the best possible Constitution, and of carrying with me, when I die, the hope that these foundations which I have established for the State will abide secure.”²⁶ In many ways, he was successful; Rome flourished through its early centuries, and the traditions he established withstood unstable rulers. Suetonius notes that Augustus “used as much foresight as could have possibly

²² Ibid., 149.

²³ Ibid., 146.

²⁴ Ibid., 114.

²⁵ Ibid., 179.

²⁶ Ibid., 69.

been provided in guarding against future disasters.”²⁷ Though he does not deserve all of the credit, his transition from republic to dictatorship was smoother than his successors’ reigns. Through the *Pax Romana*, Rome continued to flourish under centuries of Caesars and seizers.

²⁷ Ibid.

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