

REVIEW

RED TACITUS

T. E. Strunk, *History after Liberty. Tacitus on Tyrants, Sycophants, and Republicans*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2017. Pp. x + 221. Hardback, \$65.00. ISBN 978-0-472-13020-7.

Political readings of Tacitus have a very long tradition, at least as long as the more traditional—i.e. scholarly—interpretations. When Tacitus' text began to be read in the early Renaissance, his first readers caught immediately the possibilities that the *Annals*, in particular, offered with regard to contemporary politics.¹ More 'dangerously', Tacitus could be read in very different ways: as either a republican or a supporter of tyranny (as Toffanin famously put it, the 'red' and 'black' Tacitus, a view that, however, goes back to Guicciardini's *Ricordi*).² If the political reading of Tacitus eventually faded out during the Enlightenment, Tacitus continued, and continues, to be read in relation to the political life of his times, particularly his attitude towards the Principate.³ Was Tacitus a monarchist or a republican? In his first book, which originated as a dissertation at Loyola University Chicago, Strunk (henceforth S.) reads Tacitus as a fierce critic of the Principate, a system in which there was no room for *libertas*. In other words, to borrow Toffanin's famous distinction, S. revives 'il Tacito rosso'. Although S. admits that Tacitus was not a subversive politician, he argues that his works show a revolutionary writer. In the end, 'Antiquity has left no greater critique of autocracy and its psychological terror than Tacitus' writings' (181). To assert that Tacitus was a republican rather than a monarchist, however, also requires a precise definition of what constitutes a republic. For S., Tacitus saw in the concept of *libertas* the essence of republicanism. Without *libertas*, understood as freedom to participate in the political system, there could be no republic.

Chapter 1 ('*Libertas* and the Political Thought of Tacitus') begins with a short, but sensible, assessment of the main representatives of the theory of a 'moderate' Tacitus (Mommsen, Boissier, Syme), and how this position has been received by the most recent scholarship (Kapust, Oakley, Sailor). S.

¹ A. Momigliano, 'The First Political Commentary on Tacitus', *JRS* 37 (1947) 91–101 (= *Contributo alla storia degli studi classici* (Rome, 1955) 37–59 = *Essays in Ancient and Modern Historiography* (Oxford, 1977) 205–29).

² G. Toffanin, *Machiavelli e il tacitismo* (Padua, 1921; Naples, 1972²).

³ See, e.g., D. Sailor, *Writing and Empire in Tacitus* (Cambridge, 2008).

rejects the *communis opinio* that, because of his thriving under the Principate, Tacitus could not be a fierce critic of it. His analysis is based on a close reading of the many characters who were known to be opponents of the *princeps* (e.g. Thrasea Paetus and his circle of friends), to argue that the pursuit of an active political career was not inconsistent with a critical attitude towards the emperor. And this, S. argues, applies to Tacitus as well. S. does not accept the common view that the famous passage at *Agricola* 42.4 is an indirect criticism of the so-called Stoic martyrs; instead, he maintains, Tacitus is rescuing from *damnatio memoriae* those virtuous men that had fallen under the *princeps*. Likewise, he denies that *Annals* 4.20 (M. Lepidus) should be used to prove Tacitus' middle-way political stance. *Libertas*, in S.'s view, has a strong political significance in Tacitus, and has a twofold meaning: freedom from *dominatio*, and freedom to participate in the politics of a free state. In the first meaning, *libertas* is contrasted with *servitium/servitus*: the *princeps* acts as *dominus* while the free citizens are reduced to servitude. Unlike Wirszubski and the majority of scholars who have dealt with *libertas* in Tacitus, S. rejects the idea that *libertas* denotes more a personal than a political behaviour. In fact, he argues, 'Tacitean *libertas* is ... the basis for a Tacitean republicanism' (37), where free citizens operate within a free *res publica*. S. reads Tacitus as a fierce critic of the Principate as a political system, irreconcilable with freedom, which can exist only in the Republic.

In the second chapter ('The Principate and the Corruption and Restoration of Military *Libertas*'), S. focuses on military *libertas*, seen as the independence shown by the three most distinguished military leaders that appear in Tacitus' works, namely Agricola, Germanicus, and Corbulo, each one of whom eventually fell victim to the *princeps*' *invidia*. S. does a good job of tracing the development of military distinction from the Late Republic to the Empire, and his readings of Agricola and Germanicus are hardly objectionable, but that is also because the two generals have been the subject of extensive scholarly inquiry, and it is in fact very difficult to contribute anything new to the debate. More interesting is S.'s reading of Corbulo, a fascinating character whose demise, unfortunately, is not preserved in the extant Tacitean narrative. Corbulo was a complex character, and, just like Germanicus, not without flaws. S. reads Corbulo as worthy of the generals of the old republic, a staunch champion of *libertas* who spent his entire life in the service of the *res publica*. We can only speculate as to the reasons that Tacitus would have adduced for his forced suicide; yet the intricacies of his family and friends connections, including many affiliates of the so-called Stoic opposition, which S. so thoroughly points out, support only to some extent this one-sided reading of Corbulo as a loyal, republican-style general. Nero's jealousy may have been the main reason for Corbulo's fall, but perhaps Nero's suspicions were not completely unfounded.

In Chapter 3 ('The Corruption and Restoration of *Libertas Senatoria*'), S. examines the role of the senate under the *princeps*. He looks at cases of *libertas* from the two opposing sides of those who threatened it, the *delatores*, and those who championed it, particularly Marcus Lepidus, Thrasea Paetus, and Helvidius Priscus.⁴ S.'s analysis of famous cases of *delatores* provides some insightful points on the role of these men in the early Principate. The two exemplary cases that S. singles out are those of P. Suillius Rufus, a famous *delator*, and C. Silius, a victim of *delatio*. Of the three champions of *libertas* whom S. considers, Thrasea Paetus receives the lengthiest treatment. S.'s position in the endless debate on whether Tacitus is criticising or glorifying Thrasea's behaviour is in favour of the latter. Tacitus, in S.'s view, uses Thrasea as a champion of *libertas* under Nero similarly to M. Lepidus under Tiberius. They are both Tacitus' heroes. The undeniable allusions, during Thrasea's defence of Antistius Sosianus, to Lepidus' defence of Clutorius, and of the latter to the senate debate on the Catilinarian conspirators in Sallust, contribute to underlining the increasing ineffectiveness of the senate under the Principate. S.'s reading of Thrasea, whom he sees as a politician rather than a philosopher, builds on a long scholarly tradition, but I agree that Tacitus' characterisation of this famous Stoic, although not without its own ambiguities, cannot be reconciled with Tacitus' criticism of those who sought *ambitiosa mors* (*Agr.* 42.4). This apparent 'inconsistency' is destined to fuel further debate.

Libertas as freedom of speech is the focus of Chapter 4 ('The Corruption and Restoration of *Libertas* as Freedom of Speech and Expression'). S. identifies in *dominatio* (of the *princeps*) and *adulatio* the causes for the loss of freedom of speech under the Principate. This chapter looks first at the meaning of *adulatio* under the Principate, particularly during Tiberius' reign, and, after a brief introduction on the known cases of book burning during the early Principate, S. focuses on the famous episode of Cremutius Cordus in *Annals* 4. Tacitus, S. argues, identifies in Actium the moment when *adulatio* began to develop, and *libertas* to be curtailed. In other words, Tacitus blames the Principate as the main cause for the loss of *libertas*. The trial of Cremutius Cordus showed that historiography could be a dangerous enterprise, but, at the same time, that historiography could play a key role in the restoration of *libertas*. Tacitus, S. claims, used the episode of Cremutius Cordus to restore the memory of those writers whose display of *libertas* had caused their ruin.

In the last chapter ('A Historian after *Libertas*'), S. examines how Tacitus' style exploits the tension that existed between the Republic and the Principate. Tacitus, S. maintains, bridges republican and imperial historiography. Yet Tacitus, who denies that *libertas* can exist under a *princeps*, does in fact write

⁴ S. could have perhaps benefitted from J. G. F. Powell, 'Juvenal and the *Delatores*', in C. S. Kraus, J. Marincola, and C. Pelling, edd., *Ancient Historiography and its Contexts: Studies in Honour of A. J. Woodman* (Oxford, 2010) 224–44.

during the Principate. Such a paradox needed to be reconciled. The discontinuity that existed between the *libertas* of the Republic and the *servitium* of the Principate is what Tacitus highlights by adopting his idiosyncratic style. S. focuses his discussion on *Annals* 1–3, highlighting how Tacitus manipulates some death notices to suit his agenda, as in the case of Junia Tertulla’s at the end of Book 3, which Tacitus symbolically dates to the sixty-fourth year after Philippi, as if her death marked the funeral of the Republic.

S.’s reading of Tacitus’ political views is certainly challenging, and well argued. There is no doubt that Tacitus can be interpreted in different, in fact opposing, ways, as his first Renaissance readers had already understood. One could even argue that Tacitus chose to be so ambiguous, thus mirroring the events that he was narrating. In the end, we will never know. For S., Tacitus is the champion of *libertas*, the historian who saved the memory of people such as Thrasea and Helvidius from *damnatio memoriae*. S. has written an engaging book, which is pleasant to read, even for non-specialists. His thesis is not new: the republican Tacitus has never been without supporters. But S. addresses the problem in a new way, and is solidly grounded on a close reading of Tacitus’ works, although some of the well-known passages he discusses could have benefitted from some editing. S. is also very knowledgeable of the immense Tacitean scholarship, in every language, from every period, with which he engages very constructively on every page.⁵ *History after Liberty* is in sum a welcome addition to the constantly thriving scholarship on Tacitus.⁶

SALVADOR BARTERA

sb2419@msstate.edu

Mississippi State University

⁵ Although there are bibliographical items as late as 2015, some important 2013 and 2014 books, such as Woodman and Kraus on the *Agricola*, van den Berg on the *Dialogus*, and Cornell on the *Fragments of the Roman Historians*, do not seem to have been accessible to S. One notable recent omission from the general bibliography is perhaps V. E. Pagán’s *Blackwell Companion to Tacitus* (Malden and Oxford, 2012). In the discussion of obituaries and death scenes (Chapter 5), A. J. Pomeroy, *The Appropriate Comment: Death Notices in the Ancient Historians* (Frankfurt, 1991) would have been useful. In the same chapter, J. Ginsburg’s seminal work (*Tradition and Theme in the Annals of Tacitus* (New York, 1981)) would have supported S.’s discussion on Tacitus’ adoption/rejection of the republican annalistic format.

⁶ The editorial quality of the book is good overall, although there are some typos and inconsistencies. Apart from insignificant typos that do not affect comprehension, such as wrong spelling in foreign titles in the bibliography, I noticed a few slips here and there in the Latin quotations (e.g. 27, *Agricola* 3.1 *desidia*[m]; *atrium* for *artium* at 33 n. 73 and p. 35 n. 79, and also *duci*<*s*>; 48 *usas* for *suas*); the *Annals* appear to be generally quoted by book, chapter, and paragraph number (e.g. 15.30.2), but at times the quotation seems to refer to line number (e.g. at p. 31 n. 69, *Ann.* 15.52.15, 16.11.5).