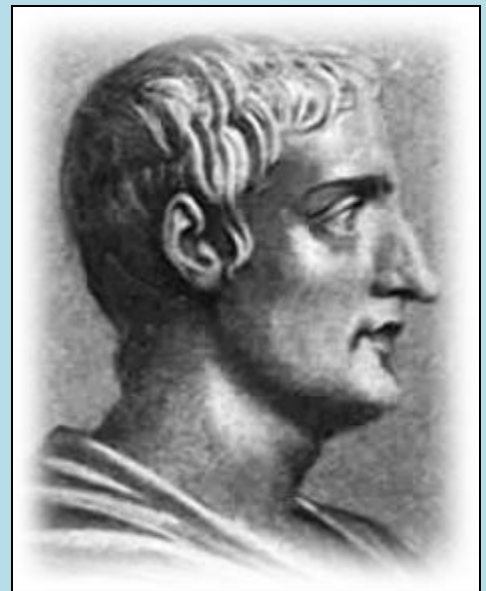


Publius Cornelius Tacitus

Tacitus (c. 56/57-ca. 125) was a Roman orator and historian. In a life that spanned the reigns of the Flavian emperors and of Trajan and Hadrian, he played a part in the public life of Rome and became its greatest historian.

Tacitus was born into a wealthy family of equestrian status. It is not known for certain where his home was, but he probably came from one of the towns of Gallia Narbonensis (modern Provence). His father had been an imperial official, holding the important post of procurator (chief financial agent) for Gallia Belgica, and he was clearly able to give his son an excellent education.



Official Career

In 77 the young Tacitus was betrothed to, and soon after married, the only daughter of Gnaeus Julius Agricola, an able soldier and administrator. Although not himself of aristocratic birth, Tacitus was allowed by the emperor Vespasian to start on a political career. The early stages of this career cannot be followed in detail, but Tacitus reached the praetorship in 88, by which time he had also become a member of one of the important priestly colleges which controlled the official religion of the Roman state.

For the next 4 years Tacitus was away from Rome, as he had been appointed by Domitian to a post in the imperial administration, either the command of a legion or the governorship of one of the less important provinces, but we do not know exactly what the post was or where he held it. In 97, during the brief reign of Nerva, Tacitus finally attained the highest traditional magistracy, the consulship,

which at this date was a ceremonial post and a necessary qualification for most of the really important appointments in the Emperor's service. But as far as we know, none of these posts was offered to Tacitus. Instead he spent a year (112-113) as governor of the peaceful senatorial province of Asia, and there is no evidence that he held any further public office.

Meanwhile, in the intervals of his official career Tacitus had spent much time in the study and practice of rhetoric, and by the time of his consulship he had won a reputation as one of the leading forensic orators of his generation. His most famous case came in 100, when together with his friend Pliny the Younger he successfully prosecuted Marius Priscus for misgovernment in Africa.

By this date Tacitus had also started on a career as a writer, and it seems likely that after this he gradually withdrew from legal practice to concentrate on his literary work. He continued to live and work in Rome until his death.

Tacitus's Writings

Tacitus's first published work was *Agricola*, a laudatory biography of his late father-in-law, which came out between 96 and 98. This was followed by *Germania* (98), a short monograph on the habits and customs of the independent tribes of Germany. Then came *Dialogus de oratoribus*, a discussion in dialogue form of the decay of Roman oratory. This has often been regarded as an early work, mainly on stylistic grounds, but it was probably written and published between 102 and 107.

After this Tacitus produced his first major historical work, the *Histories*, an account of Rome under the Flavian emperors (69-96) perhaps written mainly in the years 105-109. When complete, it was divided into 12 or 14 books, but only books 1-4 and a small part of book 5 have survived. These books were written on a very large scale, for between them they cover the events of only 2 years, 69 and 70, and it is probable that in the later books Tacitus reduced the scale of his narrative.

At one time Tacitus had intended to follow up the *Histories* with an account of the reigns of Nerva and Trajan (96-117), but he changed his mind and went back to the time of the Julio-Claudian emperors with the *Annals*, written probably between 118 and 123. This was a history of Rome from the death of Augustus in 14 to the suicide of Nero in 68. It was divided into 16 or 18 books, but well over a third of the text has been lost.

We do not have Tacitus's narrative for several of the later years of Tiberius, the whole of the brief reign of Caligula, the start of Claudius's reign, and the final years of Nero's reign, though the absence of this last section may be a result of a failure on Tacitus's part to complete the work before he died.

Tacitus as Historian

Tacitus's reputation as a historian rests primarily on the two major works of his maturity. In the *Histories* and *Annals* Tacitus produced a historical corpus that for all its battered condition ranks very high in the record of Greco-Roman historiography. It is admittedly open to criticism in certain respects: his understanding of military affairs was not very deep, so that his accounts of campaigns are sometimes obscure; and his vision tended to be concentrated unduly on events in Rome itself and extended to the provinces only in time of war, so that he failed to note the excellent work that was done, sometimes even by "bad" emperors, for the more efficient, honest, and peaceful administration of the Roman world.

More important are Tacitus's undoubted merits. On the whole, he showed good judgment in his handling of the material he found in earlier writers—he passed over in silence most of the more scandalous stories that enliven the pages of Suetonius—and he almost certainly did extensive research into the available documentary evidence, especially the records of meetings of the Senate. Moreover, unlike Livy, Tacitus possessed considerable insight into political life and a deep understanding of human nature, especially its darker sides; and he managed for the most part to live up to his own expressed intention to write "without anger and partiality."

Tacitus's one failure in this respect is his picture of Tiberius in the early books of the *Annals*, where he could not shake himself loose from the traditional picture of that emperor as a morose, cruel, and suspicious tyrant. Even here, however, when he found in the record some actions by Tiberius which did not fit his preconceived view, he did not willfully distort or omit them but contented himself with ascribing to Tiberius disreputable motives for apparently honorable acts.

In his technique Tacitus made no real innovations. In both major works he retained the annalistic system of chronology, though he sometimes found it awkward and had to put into a single year series of events which in fact had been spread over several. Similarly he regularly included in his narrative

speeches by leading figures, some of which, like the address of a Caledonian chieftain in the *Agricola*, were certainly free compositions by Tacitus himself.

But in most cases Tacitus seems to have taken pains to reproduce in his own words the general sense of what was actually said: that was certainly the case with a speech of Claudius to the Senate reported in book 6 of the *Annals*, where the preservation of most of the original text in an inscription shows clearly that Tacitus wrote his own version with a copy of the original before him. This was probably the case with many of the other speeches.

His Writing Style

In the *Dialogus* Tacitus adopted a smooth, flowing, almost Ciceronian style so unlike that of his other writings that its authenticity has sometimes—though wrongly—been doubted. But in the *Agricola* and *Germania*, and still more in the two major works, Tacitus evolved a quite remarkable style of his own, which owed much to Sallust and the Augustan poets but still more to his own genius and his rhetorical training.

Terse, powerful, and abrupt, this approach contrives to pack a remarkable amount of meaning into a few words. It can at times become monotonous, and occasionally its weightiness seems out of scale with the content, but at its best its strength and vigor enabled Tacitus to present unforgettably vivid accounts of important events. Particularly notable is his ability to sum up the salient characteristics of an individual in a few sharp, epigrammatic phrases, as in his description of Nero as "*haudquaquam sui detractor* (by no means a man to denigrate himself)" or his famous remark about Galba, "*omnium consensu capax imperii nisi imperasset* (all would have agreed that he was capable of ruling, if he had not actually reigned)." Even if Tacitus's qualities as a historian had been negligible—and they are far from that—the power and originality of his writing would still have placed him among the greatest writers of imperial Rome.