

BOOK REVIEW

History after Liberty: Tacitus on Tyrants, Sycophants, and Republicans. By THOMAS E. STRUNK. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2016. Pp. x + 221. Hardcover, \$65.00. ISBN 9780472130207.

The thesis defended by Thomas Strunk in his book on Tacitus is provocative, to say the least. In this work, he advocates that Tacitus did not recognize the Principate as a continuity of the Republic, and, therefore, his writings would actually reveal an attempt to elaborate a political alternative to the imperial regime, centered on the notion of *libertas*. Through this concept, Tacitus would have aimed not only at censuring individual conducts of emperors and aristocrats, but would also have sought to criticize the broader structure of the Principate: its political system rather than specific individuals. This is an important contribution of the study carried out by Strunk, for this facet has received little emphasis in Tacitean scholarship. In general, Tacitus is portrayed as simultaneously adept and critical of the imperial regime. For Strunk, on the other hand, the political thought of Tacitus would not entail any commitment to the rule of the *principes*.

In the first chapter, “*Libertas* and the Political Thought of Tacitus”, Strunk marks his position in relation to the existing bibliography on Tacitus. Here, the author rejects the qualification of Tacitus as a monarchist, based on what he calls a “biographical fallacy”, that is, the perception that Tacitus’ *cursus honorum* would, above all, demonstrate adaptation to and connivance with the Principate. On the other hand, Strunk argues that “opposition could actively use the *cursus honorum* as a means of opposition” (11). The author also denounces the “fallacy of the middle-way” (usually extracted from *Agr.* 42.4 and *Ann.* 4.20). In this case, Strunk sustains that *moderatio* and *prudencia* could not fully account for the political thought of Tacitus, and that this compromise actually aimed at the restoration of the Republic rather than an acceptance of the Principate.

In the second chapter, “The Principate and the Corruption and Restoration of Military *Libertas*”, Strunk turns to the impact of the Principate in the military sphere, analyzing the performance of emperors and military commanders through the figures of Agricola, Germanicus and Corbulo. Tacitus would have portrayed these individuals as mirroring Republican commanders, guided by the mission of

safeguarding the *res publica*, while “the Principate as an institution ... was more concerned with its own preservation than the common good, the situation in which the *princeps* became the enemy of peace and Rome itself” (67).

Senatorial freedom is the theme of the third chapter, “The Corruption and Restoration of *Libertas Senatoria*”. The author investigates the role of the *delatores* and their disruptive influence within the Principate, while examining Tacitus’ reports on P. Suillius Rufus and the judgement of C. Silius. The *delatores* are described as people who privileged personal interests in detriment of the public good, contrary to the Republican role played by M. Aemilius Lepidus and Thræsea Paetus, for instance. According to Strunk, “the actions Tacitus most admired were not those that accepted the dictates of the Principate and the status quo, but rather those displaying a degree of *libertas* in service to the *res publica*. The argument that Tacitus admired the moderation of senators like Lepidus, while he disparaged the independence of individuals like Thræsea, is a false dichotomy” (113). Likewise, the image of Helvidius Priscus, in the *Historiae*, is that of someone who sought to restore the *res publica* after it had been attacked by emperors who pursued only personal gain. In short, Strunk diverges from those scholars to whom Thræsea and Helvidius would have been in search of personal glory, and demonstrating a kind of *libertas* that would not have rendered any practical benefits in the context of the Principate. For Tacitus, *libertas* is an eminently positive concept, and with reference to Republican practices.

Those practices, especially freedom of speech and expression, are the object of the fourth chapter of the book. Here, Strunk analyzes the impact of *adulatio* and *dominatio* in the Principate, since they would have promoted the loss of freedom of expression. It is in Tacitus that, for the first time, *adulatio* appears in historiography embedded in political and moral implications. From the Senate’s point of view, adulation had contributed to render the senatorial role irrelevant, for it had become common to address matters of the Senate’s competence to the *princeps*. From the point of view of literature and the very writing of history, adulation began to contaminate what was composed under the emperors, including leading to a self-censorship by writers. It is under this light that Strunk analyses the account written by Tacitus of the judgment of Cremutius Cordus. For the author, Tacitus, as Cordus, “would use his writings to make transparent all that the regime and its *adulatores* had made obscure” (165). This would consist of an exercise of *libertas*.

In the last chapter, “A Historian after *Libertas*”, Strunk concludes his narrative arguing that, to write the history of the Principate, Tacitus “has to find a way to capture the spirit of *libertas* exemplified by Republican historiography in order to

reveal the Principate as a *dominatio*, an exercise that requires a demonstration of the ways the Principate disrupted Republican *libertas*" (169). One of the strategies used by Tacitus to suggest this idea to his audience consisted in presenting, throughout the first three books of the *Annales*, the progressive death of the Republican system by a sequence of obituaries of individuals who were ancestrally connected to the Republic, as Junia Tertulla (Ann. 3.76.1), the niece of Cato Uticensis, wife of Gaius Cassius, and sister of Marcus Brutus.

Thus, in his book, Strunk attests to Tacitus' unequivocal republicanism. A republicanism based on the belief that the state cannot be under the possession of an individual. The participation of citizens in the political system would be a *conditio sine qua non*, and *libertas* would be the very cornerstone of such system.

Strunk's book is worth reading and debating particularly by scholars who study Tacitus, and also by those who are concerned with the boundaries between Republic and Principate. His study reviews the current and somewhat hegemonic interpretations of Tacitus, especially those concerning the idea that Tacitus would demonstrate a kind of commitment to the Principate by proposing intermediate conducts between *servitus* and *libertas*. However, after reading his book, one question remains: to what extent is there, in fact, in Tacitus' work, a proposal of a politically viable alternative to the imperial regime? Although Strunk himself recognizes this difficulty, it does not invalidate his interpretation of Tacitus' republicanism.

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