

Lee L. BRICE

Rehabilitating Germanicus: Tacitus and the Rhetoric of Military Crisis

Negative modern treatments of Germanicus' leadership are in part a result of under-appreciating Tacitus' use of the rhetoric of military crisis. A review of Tacitus' presentation of military figures in times of emergency demonstrates that Germanicus' actions in 14 CE were consistent with the rhetoric of military crisis. Tacitus' use of this rhetorical approach to highlight his characterizations fits in a tradition of Roman historiography.

Since D.A. Shotter's examination of Tacitus' presentation of Germanicus (Shotter 1968, 194-214), negative treatment of his leadership has dominated the scholarship. A significant element of the modern criticism has been Germanicus' offer to commit suicide during the mutiny along the lower Rhine following Augustus' death. A sample of scholarship demonstrates that reactions to his behavior generally do not vary except by degree, "an impulsive and desperate act," (Shotter 1968, 197-98); "theatrical in the extreme," (Ross 1973, 215); "an histrionic and rather absurdly sentimental gesture," (Rutland 1987, 155); and "melodramatic," (Barrett 1996, 26). His actions are, however, not as atypical as commentators have assumed. Rather, they must be seen as a function of the rhetoric of military crisis.

The rhetoric of military crisis refers to the manner in which military men, usually officers, express themselves (or are presented as doing so) at times of emergency. The rhetorical display may appear in a speech or through action, and often both, with the goal of exhibiting the actor's *virtus* in a military setting (Harris 20 and 39-40; Rosenstein 1990, 116-48). Such displays are familiar from Roman histories, including the campaigns of Sulla, Pompey, and Caesar. The rhetoric of military crisis became a *topos* of Roman histories that audiences expected to find, and in some cases authors may have massaged the record when the evidence was insufficient (Rosenstein 1990 116-121). The most common *locus* for such expressions of *virtus* in Roman history is in an episode of military crisis. A battle is not necessary, however, since a peace-time mutiny can become a crisis. Germanicus had to resolve a significant mutiny without the aid of a counter-force and had no time to raise one. The reader should not be surprised to find, therefore, that after circumstances turned contrary he made a rhetorical display. Although theatrical, the offer to commit suicide rather than betray Tiberius was consistent with a display of *virtus* and *fides* (Williams 1997, 53-54). Indeed, only such a theatrical display would have achieved the result of getting the audience's attention, and it is the audience that mattered to both Germanicus and Tacitus. The audiences to which both Germanicus and Tacitus appeal are aware of the rhetoric, so it should not be surprising that such a display appears in Germanicus' reaction. Regardless of whether the tale was embroidered or even fabricated it was not unusual; it served a purpose and its use was a result of a tradition of rhetoric in military crisis.

Although some commentators have treated Germanicus' actions as if they were unique and excessive, an examination of Roman historians reveals that they were not so unusual. In book one of the *Annals* alone, Tacitus provides two examples of similar rhetorical

displays of officers who preferred to die rather than be humiliated by their soldiers in the midst of crisis (*Ann.* 1.18 and 65). Other examples of Tacitus' employment of this rhetoric of crisis can be found in the *Annals* and *Histories*, demonstrating his careful use of the tradition. Germanicus' use of rhetorical display should not be singled out for censure since it was part of an historical tradition and was part of a larger successful resolution of the mutinies.