

### Germanicus: Rome's Knight in Shining Armor

Adopted by Tiberius upon the word of the emperor Augustus, Germanicus was in an ideal position to become a future emperor. His many victories in Germania and Asia proved Germanicus to be a strong and able leader. He successfully suppressed a rebellion from taking place among his soldiers. He was also responsible for the brutal yet successful raid against the Marsi, a German tribe. Germanicus was well loved by his army as well as the people of Rome and one can argue that the Roman people wanted to see Germanicus as emperor. He possessed all the qualities of a well-respected Roman and because he spent the majority of his career away from Rome, it was easy for the Roman people to create an idealized image of Germanicus. Many viewed Germanicus as the ideal Roman who, along with his army, fought and defeated the many enemies of Rome. Germanicus made it possible for the Roman people to hope for something better. The Roman people knew that Tiberius would not be emperor forever. They believed that with a Roman such as Germanicus next in line for the throne, they could be confident that Rome was in safe and capable hands. However, with the sudden and suspicious details surrounding Germanicus' death, Romans lost their chance for their ideal ruler and Tiberius was forced to clean up the mess that the death caused in Rome.

Germanicus was born in 15 B.C. to Drusus, the brother of Tiberius, and Antonia Minor. In 4 B.C., Augustus ordered his successor, Tiberius, to adopt Germanicus. At this point, Augustus, who was reaching the end of his life and reign, is said to have been persuaded by his cunning wife, Livia into appointing his adopted son, Tiberius, as his heir to the throne. By ordering Tiberius to adopt Germanicus as his son, Augustus was making it known that he intended for Germanicus to be next in line, after Tiberius, for the

throne. Augustus had also adopted his good friend Marcus Agrippa's son, Agrippa Postumus. However, when Augustus was presented with the issue of placing someone in command of armies on the Rhine, it was Germanicus and not Agrippa Postumus who he sent. Tacitus writes that "Nevertheless, it was not he [Agrippa Postumus] but Germanicus, the son of Nero Drusus, whom the emperor placed in command...and, although Tiberius had a grown son of his own, he ordered him to adopt Germanicus" (*Tac. Annals* 33). The favor that Augustus showed to Germanicus is apparent throughout the end of his reign. Shortly after the death of Augustus, the senate appointed Germanicus as commander of the Roman forces in Germania.

For a new emperor, the support of the Roman army was important if not crucial for their success. When the will of Augustus named Tiberius as the next emperor, Tiberius did not have the support of the army. In fact, the army's loyalty lay with Germanicus. Suetonius describes how "the army in Germany also refused to acknowledge an Emperor whom they had not chosen themselves, and did all they could to make their commander, Germanicus, accept the supreme office despite his flat refusal" (*Suet. Tiberius* 25). Tiberius understood all too well the importance of having the support of the army and he also recognized the army's support of Germanicus. Undoubtedly, this knowledge would have worried Tiberius. Only newly emperor, Tiberius would have worried that with the backing of the Roman army, Germanicus would forcefully take the title of emperor. Having knowledge of the Roman people's love for Germanicus, is it safe to assume that Tiberius found himself in an uncertain and uncomfortable position. In fact, Suetonius writes, "he [Tiberius] then gave out that he was dangerously ill, so that Germanicus would wait with more patience for an early succession, or at least share the

sovereignty” (*Suet. Tiberius* 25). Because Tiberius was unsure of Germanicus’ true intentions regarding the throne, it is only logical that Tiberius assumed Germanicus intended to take it from him. Tiberius feared Germanicus and his army and “only showed signs of hesitation when he addressed the senate...because of Germanicus, who was extremely popular...Tiberius was afraid Germanicus might prefer the throne to the prospect of it” (*Tac. Annals* 36). Tiberius’ awareness of the Roman people’s (as well as the senate’s) fondness for Germanicus coupled with the fact that he was unsure of what the popular general’s intentions were caused him to act cautiously when he addressed the senate with any issue involving Germanicus.

While Germanicus was fighting against Arminius, leader of the Germans who destroyed Varus and his troops at Teutoburg forest, he came across the very location of the fateful battle. Tacitus writes, “the scene lived up to its horrible associations...on the open ground were whitening bones, scattered where men had fled, heaped up where they had stood and fought back” (*Annals* 67). The battle of Teutoburg Forest was a terrible loss for the Romans and with the destruction of Varus and his army, the Romans lost their standards. This scene in Tacitus is extremely important because it illustrates Germanicus as a leader who understands the loss that Rome experiences with this battle and takes the time to grieve while burying the bones of the fallen Romans. These solemn and serious actions were not received well by Tiberius. According to Tacitus, when Germanicus “shared in the general grief, and laid the first turf of the funeral-mound as a heartfelt tribute to the dead...he earned Tiberius’ disapproval” (*Annals* 68). Tacitus suggests that perhaps Tiberius felt a commander belonging to the antique priesthood of the Augurs should not have handled “objects belonging to the dead” (*Annals* 68). While

Tiberius may have felt that this act was below a commander of Germanicus' status, the Roman people would have recognized that Germanicus was deeply sorrowful for what happened to his fellow commander and Romans. The Roman people would have loved and respected Germanicus for these acts. The kindness shown by Germanicus to Segestes and the wife of Arminius (an enemy of Rome) along with the burying of the dead Romans at Teutoburg Forest would have been admired and esteemed among the Roman people.

After Germanicus' victory over Arminius and his tribe, Germanicus is said to have erected a "heap of arms" portraying the inscription: "dedicated to Mars and the Divine Augustus by the army of Tiberius Caesar after its conquest of the nations between the Rhine and the Elbe" (*Tac. Annals* 87). Tacitus is unsure of the reason why Germanicus chose to leave himself out of the inscription. He argues that perhaps it was because he feared being viewed as jealous. However, he claims the more likely explanation is that Germanicus believed his success in Germania against Arminius and his tribe was enough and there was no need to display his name (*Tac. Annals* 87). After the defeat of Arminius, Germanicus and his men completed successful attacks against the Chatti and the Marsi. Tacitus mentions that after these events "the Romans were said to be invincible and proof against every misfortune" and that even though many of their arms, horses and men were lost, they were still able to "attack with undiminished courage and ferocity, apparently more numerous than ever" (*Tac. Annals* 88). News of these successes was arguably worrisome to Tiberius. In his position as emperor, where the opinion and views of the Roman people were crucial to his success, Tiberius was viewed as an emperor who remained in Rome while the brave and courageous Germanicus was

fighting his battles throughout the empire. This further adds to the fact that, because he was successfully fighting battles against Rome's enemies away from Rome, Germanicus was seen as an idealized leader of Rome. Tacitus suggests that Tiberius was aware of this fact as well and "instructed Germanicus to return for the Triumph that had been voted to him" (*Tac. Annals* 88). Tiberius wanted Germanicus to return to Rome because he realized how dangerous it was for his position as emperor for Germanicus to be away.

Not too long after Germanicus' campaigns in Germania, trouble began to develop in the East. Tacitus writes, "Tiberius was not sorry that the Eastern situation was disturbed. For this provided a pretext for separating Germanicus from his familiar army and subjecting him to the intrigues and hazards of a new provincial command" (*Tac. Annals* 79). In Tiberius' mind, this would have been the worst possible scenario for Germanicus and the best scenario for Tiberius himself. Tiberius believed that Germanicus' power lay in his devoted army and by separating the two of them; Tiberius was taking away Germanicus' strength. However, the people of Rome did not feel the same way and Suetonius writes, "as a result of these events, 'Give us back Germanicus!' was written on the walls throughout Rome and shouted all night" (*Tiberius* 52). The Roman people wanted nothing more than for Germanicus to return from campaigning and remain in Rome.

Tacitus claims that Germanicus "solved every eastern question" (*Tac. Annals* 106). Tacitus is arguing that, even in the eastern provinces, Germanicus can do no wrong. However, Piso, whom Tiberius had appointed governor of Syria, refused to obey Germanicus' orders to "conduct part of the Roman army to Armenia or send with it his son" (*Tac. Annals* 106). The two men made superficial amends and Germanicus left to

visit Egypt. Once news of Germanicus' success in the east reached Rome, Tacitus writes that the senate voted for Germanicus and his brother (who had also been victorious in battle) to receive ovations upon entering the city (*Tac. Annals* 108). This news would have undoubtedly been pleasing as well as exciting for the people of Rome. Finally, the beloved Germanicus would be returning, triumphant, to Rome where he belonged. However, Germanicus' visit to Egypt and the way in which he was popularly received would prove to be his undoing.

Egypt was an extremely important province to Rome in that almost the entirety of Rome's grain supply came from Egypt and whoever controlled Egypt, in a way, controlled Rome. Tiberius would have been terribly worried that the Germanicus who was beloved and popular with the Romans was now becoming popular with the Egyptians and Alexandrians. If Germanicus were to gain supporters in Egypt, raise an army and seize control of the grain supply, Tiberius would be almost powerless to stop him. Tiberius decided to use the fact that Germanicus had entered Alexandria without the permission of the emperor against him, "Tiberius criticized Germanicus mildly for his clothes and deportment, but reprimanded him severely for infringing a ruling of Augustus by entering Alexandria without the emperor's permission" (*Tac. Annals* 110). When Germanicus was leaving Egypt, he discovered that all the orders he had made to various commanders and cities either had been cancelled or reversed (*Tac. Annals* 111). Shortly after feuding with Piso over these issues, Germanicus fell ill. Tacitus argues that Germanicus suspected Piso of poisoning him and that an examination of his room revealed "the remains of human bodies, spells, curses, lead tablets inscribed with the patient's name, charred and bloody ashes, and other malignant objects which are

supposed to consign souls to the powers of the tomb” (*Tac. Annals* 112). After some days, Germanicus succumbed to his illness and died. Tacitus’ description of Germanicus and his funeral paint the picture of a man who concerned himself with the wellbeing of his country and her people, a man who loved his family, and a man who was loved and respected by many. He writes,

The province and surrounding peoples grieved greatly. Foreign countries and kings mourned his friendliness to allies and forgiveness to enemies. Both his looks and his words had inspired respect. Yet this dignity and grandeur, befitting his lofty rank, had been unaccompanied by any arrogance or jealousy. At his funeral there was no procession of statues. But there were abundant eulogies and reminiscences of his fine character (*Tac. Annals* 113)

Immediately, Piso was suspected of masterminding the poisoning of Germanicus.

Tiberius knew that the people of Rome would not be happy until someone was placed with the blame and punished for the death of Germanicus. Despite having a seemingly solid defense, the judges at Piso’s trial were merciless. It seemed as if the judges were blinded by their duty and respect for Germanicus rather than their duty to reserve their judgments until the end of the trial. The *Decree of the Senate Concerning Piso* claims that the Roman senate knew Piso had “rejoiced” in the death of Germanicus (60).

Tiberius knew that the Roman people also suspected him of working with Piso to ensure the death of Germanicus. Suetonius writes, “It is even so believed that he arranged for Gnaeus Piso, the Governor of Syria, to poison Germanicus; and that Piso...would have produced his instructions had they not been taken from him when he confronted Tiberius with them, whereupon he was executed” (*Tiberius*. 52). The fact that Tiberius and Piso both refused to produce their private correspondence was more than suspicious. Tiberius, however, needed to secure his own position and if that meant placing full blame on Piso,

he was willing to do that. The *Decree of the Senate Concerning Piso* offers additional reasons, other than Germanicus' death, for Piso's guilt. The decree claims Piso "had corrupted the military discipline...not only by indulging the soldiers, <so that they would not> obey their superiors...but also by giving donatives in his own name from the funds of our princeps" (55). The repercussions of the circumstances surrounding the death of Germanicus enhanced the power of the emperor from then on. Tiberius proved that the emperor now had the power to facilitate the death of his rival, even when that rival happens to be Rome's most loved hero.

When the stress of the trial and the threats from the Roman people became too much, Piso committed suicide in the confines of his own home before the trial had even ended (*Tac. Annals* 126). Even though Tiberius was not guilty by the Roman law, one can argue that he was still guilty in the eyes of the Romans. Once the suspicion was placed upon Tiberius, the Roman people would have understood that Tiberius was always worried about and, in a way, jealous of Germanicus. Germanicus' death proved to be a problem for Tiberius because he lost favor with the Roman people and he would have to work for the duration of his reign to reclaim that favor.

Germanicus was dearly loved and respected by most of Rome. As a popular general who led his army in many successful campaigns, Germanicus became an idealized hero of Rome. His many excellent character traits, including his love for the Roman people, made Germanicus an ideal candidate for future emperor. However, when Tiberius took the throne after the death of Augustus, Germanicus unwillingly became an imposing threat. The devotion shown to Germanicus by his army only added to Tiberius' fear that Germanicus would attempt to forcefully take the throne from him. Eventually,



the threat posed by Germanicus due to his popularity with the army and the Roman people led to his murder. His murder was thought to be planned out by Tiberius and carried out by Piso. However, in order to save face in front of the Roman people, Tiberius and the senate placed the full blame on Piso. By doing this, Tiberius proved that the emperor ultimately had complete control over the life and death of Romans. Even those as popular and as loved as Germanicus.