

Tiberius

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Introduction

In AD 14, after a reign of 41 years,¹ the life of the first Roman 'emperor'² came to an end. Augustus had prepared his step-son Tiberius as his successor. However, such a dynastic and direct transfer of power had never been attempted since the founding of the Republic in 509 BC, and on many past occasions the death of a great and powerful man had caused the Republic to plunge into chaos.³ The accession of Tiberius was, therefore, the ultimate test of whether Rome could continue to be ruled by one man appointed by his predecessor, or would lurch back to the multiplicity of magistracies and dispersed power of the Republic (or a breakup of the Empire).

In this discussion we will be taking a broad overview of the life of Tiberius. We will examine his early years, in which he fell in and out of favour with Augustus, his isolation and self-imposed exile, followed by a return and reconciliation, his accession to the 'throne' and his 22 year reign (AD 14 - 37). Finally, we will discuss how Tiberius managed the first dynastic transition of power in Rome - in some respects a more challenging task than establishing the empire.

The intensity of activity in the period under discussion (42 BC - AD 37), the volume of surviving literary and archaeological evidence, and the number of individuals involved, means we will mention only briefly, or skip altogether, some of the events which occurred. Suggestions for future reading are provided at the end for those who wish to examine the period in more detail.

Two previous talks, *Augustus: The Path to Power* and *Augustus: First Emperor of Rome*, discussed in detail the rise to power and reign of Tiberius' predecessor, his step-father Augustus.

¹As Augustus was never formally crowned as emperor - though he was granted titles such as *primus inter pares* (first amongst equals), *princeps* (first citizen) and *pater patriae* (Father of the country), and of course *Augustus* - the dating of his reign is open to discussion. Possible start dates include the First Settlement (27 BC), where he received the titles of Augustus and princeps, or the Second Settlement (23 BC). The earliest of these dates gives a 40-41 year reign, from 27 BC - AD 14.

²Although 'emperor' is not a word the Romans would have used - and Augustus was careful right until the end to avoid any suggestion of kingship, regardless of the facts - modern convention is to refer to Augustus as the first emperor and we will use emperor and princeps interchangeably.

³Perhaps the most obvious example being the assassination of Julius Caesar in 44 BC, which resulted in 17 years of crisis until the relative stability brought about by the First Settlement.

Family and early life

Born in Rome on 16th November 42 BC as Tiberius Claudius Nero,⁴ Tiberius' parents were Livia Drusilla and Tiberius Claudius Nero.⁵ Nero had originally wanted to marry Cicero's daughter,⁶ which could have resulted in an interesting link between the self-proclaimed 'saviour of the Republic'⁷ and the dynasty of Roman emperors.

Nero was an active participant in the chaos that plunged the Roman Republic into civil war and eventually resulted in the transition to empire. As quaestor,⁸ Nero served with Julius Caesar, and commanded his fleet during the Alexandrian War, for which service he was rewarded with a priesthood.⁹ Despite this connection, he appears to have approved of the assassination of Caesar, as he proposed that not only should there be an amnesty for the 'liberators' (as voted by the other senators) but that they should be rewarded for their efforts.¹⁰ He was also later elected praetor, the penultimate step on the *cursus honorum*, though he does not appear to have reached the consulship.¹¹

Shortly after, Nero fled to Sicily and joined Sextus Pompey,¹² who had escaped to Sicily and was causing problems for the Second Triumvirate¹³ by offering sanctuary for those named in the proscriptions,¹⁴ and blocking the importation of grain into Italy. However, Sextus Pompey delayed granting an audience to Nero, and therefore he left to join Mark Antony.¹⁵ Although Nero had originally been proscribed,¹⁶ an amnesty had been agreed as part of a peace agreement with Sextus Pompey, which included the safe return of any men who had been proscribed or taken up refuge in Sicily.¹⁷

On his return with Livia - who had given birth to Tiberius and was pregnant with his brother, Nero Claudius Drusus - Nero was introduced to Octavian. Unfortunately for Nero, Octavian fell instantly in love with Livia, and wanted to marry her - despite the fact that Octavian was already married to Scribonia.¹⁸ At this point Octavian was a triumvir, and therefore one of the most powerful men in

⁴Suetonius, *Tiberius* 5

⁵Roman naming conventions can cause confusion, as it was common for the eldest son to be named after his father - hence we have Tiberius Claudius Nero the father (usually referred to as Nero) and the son (usually referred to as Tiberius). Other examples include Mark Antony and Cicero. The relatively limited pool of names also means that we have multiple men referred to as Nero during the period under discussion, but only towards the end do we meet the one who would become the infamous emperor. Daughters would often be named after their mother, and this can be particularly problematic when we come across the small number of famous women in our sources, such as Livia.

⁶Cicero, *Letters to Atticus* 6.6.1

⁷Cicero, *Pro Cnaeo Plancio* 36.89

⁸Quaestor was the first step on the *cursus honorum*, the list of political offices in the Republic. As this took place after the reforms of Sulla, reaching the quaestorship resulted in automatic enrollment in the Senate.

⁹Suetonius, *Tiberius* 4; Caesar, *The Alexandrian War* 25

¹⁰Suetonius, *Tiberius* 4. Eventually a compromise was reached whereby the assassins were pardoned and provinces were allocated to Brutus and Cassius, two of the ringleaders. In exchange, all of Caesar's actions and decisions were ratified (Plutarch, *Antony* 14).

¹¹Suetonius, *Tiberius* 4

¹²Suetonius, *Tiberius* 4; Cassius Dio, *Roman History* 48.15; Velleius Paterculus, *History of Rome* 2.75

¹³The Second Triumvirate was an agreement between Antony, Octavian and Lepidus to divide the Roman Republic between them to rule. It lasted for ten years (43-33 BC) and was legalised by the passing of the *Lex Titia*.

¹⁴After the formation of the Second Triumvirate, the triumvirs drew up lists of men who were to be killed and their property seized and sold. Cicero was one of the first victims of the proscriptions.

¹⁵Suetonius, *Tiberius* 4; Cassius Dio, *Roman History* 48.15.

¹⁶Tacitus, *Annals* 6.51. No reason is given by Tacitus for why Nero's name was added to the proscription list, but most of those proscribed appear to have fallen into three categories: those who had substantial wealth (which would be seized and sold), those who were a threat to the triumvirs, and those with whom the triumvirs had a personal score to settle (Cicero being the most well-known example, having attacked Antony many times in the Senate with his *Philippics*). Having suggested rewards for the assassins of Caesar may have been sufficient for Nero to qualify under the third of these groups.

¹⁷Tacitus, *Annals* 5.1; Velleius Paterculus, *History of Rome* 2.77; Suetonius, *Tiberius* 4. The peace did not last long and Pompey was eventually defeated and executed without trial, possibly on the orders of Antony (Appian, *Civil Wars* 5.144; Velleius Paterculus, *History of Rome* 2.79).

¹⁸Scribonia was Octavian's second wife, whom he had married after divorcing his first wife Claudia, so he had form in this regard (he was also betrothed to another woman before he met Claudia, see Suetonius, *Augustus* 62 for the full

Rome, and was not to be argued with. Nero and Octavian divorced their current wives and then Octavian married Livia, with Nero dying soon afterwards¹⁹ and Tiberius delivering the oration at his funeral.²⁰ This appears to have been an excellent match as they then remained together until Octavian's death in AD 14, though the marriage would not result in any children. As a result, Tiberius became the step-son of Octavian, and this would eventually lead to him succeeding Augustus as princeps.

As a boy, Tiberius was a member of Octavian's household, and took part in events such as Octavian's triumph after the Battle of Actium, which resulted in the defeat of Antony and Cleopatra and left Octavian as the undisputed number one man in Rome.²¹ He was also betrothed to Vipsania Agrippina, daughter of Agrippa, Octavian's right-hand man and trusted general.²² Although such 'arranged' marriages are viewed with caution today - principally because of the risk of coercion - they were not unusual in Rome, nor was a large gap in ages between husband and wife²³ or a betrothal at a very early age. By all accounts it was a happy marriage, and Tiberius had great affection for Agrippina.²⁴

Military service and political career

Any young man with a potential political career ahead of him would be expected to serve in the military, and Tiberius was no exception.²⁵ However, the first stages of his career began in the courts, where he acted as both prosecutor and defender.²⁶ As quaestor, he led a commission to sort out the supply of grain to Rome - something which could cause severe civil unrest if left unchecked.²⁷

Once he had reached an age at which he could command armies, Tiberius began to build a reputation as a competent general. First, he fought against the Cantabrians in Spain, before moving troops into Armenia and restoring to the throne a king who was friendly to Rome, thus helping to secure the borders of the Empire. He also led the mission to restore the lost standards of Crassus from Parthia.²⁸

list). However, whilst in modern times we might frown upon this behaviour, it was by no means unusual in Ancient Rome. Marriages were often conducted for political reasons, and could end when the alliance was no longer useful, a better prospect arrived, or when the wife died (often in childbirth). Pompey the Great for example had at least five wives and Julius Caesar had at least three, plus his dalliances with Cleopatra.

¹⁹Suetonius, *Augustus* 62; Suetonius, *Tiberius* 4; Cassius Dio, *Roman History* 48.44; Velleius Paterculus, *History of Rome* 2.79; Tacitus, *Annals* 5.1. The fact that Nero Claudius Drusus was born shortly after the marriage between Octavian and Livia led to a saying that they were lucky to have a child in only three months (Cassius Dio, *Roman History* 48.44; Suetonius, *Claudius* 1).

²⁰Suetonius, *Tiberius* 6. We do not have a record of what was said.

²¹Suetonius, *Tiberius* 6. Tiberius rode alongside Octavian's chariot - a possible reference to when Julius Caesar allowed Octavian to ride in his carriage. For the events leading to the Battle of Actium and the battle itself, see: Cassius Dio, *Roman History* 50.4-51; Plutarch, *Antony* 62-64. Tacitus records that after Actium, 'the interests of peace required that all power should be concentrated in the hands of one man [Octavian]' (*Histories* 1.1).

²²Cornelius Nepos, *Atticus* 19.4

²³Typically the wife would be younger, possibly because one of the purposes of marriage was to conceive children and childbirth was risky for women.

²⁴Suetonius, *Tiberius* 7

²⁵Unlike in modern societies, and particularly democracies, where the military and politics are generally kept separate, this was not the case in Rome. There was no distinction between acting as a lawyer or orator, serving in the army, and a political career, and each strand would often reinforce the other (e.g. defending a prominent senator in court could lead to their backing in a later election, and success on the battlefield went down well with the Senate and People).

²⁶Suetonius, *Tiberius* 8

²⁷Suetonius, *Tiberius* 8; Velleius Paterculus, *History of Rome* 2.94. This may be the incident which Augustus takes credit for in his list of achievements (*Res Gestae* 5.2). Augustus was well aware of the dangers of disruption to the corn supply, as when Sextus Pompey had blockaded Sicily the angry populace had pelted Octavian and Antony with missiles, despite them being the two most powerful men in Rome. The disorder was only quashed by the use of force (Appian, *Civil Wars* 5.67-68), and Juvenal drily noted that the plebs were only interested in 'bread and circuses', i.e. subsidised grain and gladiatorial shows (*Satires* 10.77-81). Eventually Augustus had to impose a limit (200,000) on the number of citizens who were entitled to free grain (Cassius Dio, *Roman History* 55.10).

²⁸Suetonius, *Tiberius* 9; Cassius Dio, *Roman History* 54.8; Velleius Paterculus, *History of Rome* 2.94. Crassus had led an ill-fated expedition into Parthia, in an attempt to win glory equal to his colleagues in the First Triumvirate, Pompey and

Augustus naturally took the credit for this²⁹ - all military victories were 'won' by, or in the name of, the princeps, regardless of his involvement - but the fact that he trusted this important task to Tiberius marked him as a man to watch. At some point during the campaigns, Augustus arranged entertainment for the troops, which was organised by Tiberius.³⁰

In 16 BC, Tiberius became praetor and was taken to Gaul by Augustus. Whilst there, he engaged in a naval battle with the Vindelici, and discovered the source of the Danube.³¹ During this time his wife gave birth to Drusus Julius Caesar, who would be the only biological son of Tiberius to survive to adulthood. At around this time, he was also elected to his first consulship - significantly in advance of the usual minimum age requirement of 42.³²

In 12 BC, Marcus Vipsanius Agrippa, Augustus' most competent and loyal general, died. This created a problem for Augustus, as the question arose as to who would look after his now fatherless grandsons if Augustus died before they came of age and could take over as princeps. Augustus 'solved' this problem by forcing Tiberius to divorce his current wife, Vipsania, and marry Agrippa's widow (Julia the Elder, the only biological child of Augustus), thus demonstrating once again that marriage for ambitious men (and, occasionally, women) was often driven by political considerations.³³ This was the second time Augustus had intervened to decide Julia's husband, as he had previously forced Agrippa to divorce Marcella in order to marry Julia. This marriage meant that Tiberius was both Augustus' step-son and son-in-law, and whilst this may appear strange to modern readers, it does not appear to have been the subject of much comment in Rome.

By 6 BC, Tiberius had taken over the command of the armies of the Rhine,³⁴ received a second triumph and a second consulship,³⁵ and was granted tribunician power (*tribunicia potestas*) for a five year period,³⁶ in theory making him equal to Augustus in this respect.³⁷

Retirement

Despite having reached the height of his career, and still being in excellent health, Tiberius decided not to go to Armenia - the province which Augustus had placed him in charge of - and instead went into sudden 'retirement' at Rhodes.³⁸ Various reasons are given for his decision, including: his dislike of Julia,³⁹ the hope that a prolonged absence from Rome would enhance his reputation, and that he wanted to (or felt compelled to) give Augustus' grandsons, Gaius and Lucius, space to grow into potential successors. Tiberius appeared to regret his decision after a while, but Augustus refused his

Caesar. The campaign was a disaster, with the Romans suffering heavy losses and, more importantly from a prestige perspective, the loss of legionary standards. Crassus paid for his incompetence with his life after the Battle of Carrhae, sometimes referred to as one of 'Rome's Greatest Defeats'.

²⁹Augustus, *Res Gestae* 27.2. However, he does note that this was achieved 'through the agency of Tiberius Nero'. The recovery of the standards is also referred to by Virgil (*Aeneid* 7.604).

³⁰Cassius Dio, *Roman History* 53.26

³¹Strabo, *Geography* 7.1.5

³²Suetonius, *Tiberius* 9. The rules for the *cursus honorum*, including minimum ages, had been codified by Sulla towards the end of the Republic, however they were generally disregarded during the Empire and it was not unusual for sons and grandsons of the princeps to be elected to offices well before the minimum ages.

³³Suetonius, *Tiberius* 7; Suetonius, *Augustus* 63; Cassius Dio, *Roman History* 54.31, 54.35; Velleius Paterculus, *History of Rome* 2.96; Augustus, *Res Gestae* 30.1

³⁴Cassius Dio, *Roman History* 55.6; Orosius 6.21.24

³⁵Velleius Paterculus, *History of Rome* 2.97

³⁶Suetonius, *Tiberius* 9; Cassius Dio, *Roman History* 55.9

³⁷Velleius Paterculus describes Tiberius as being 'the equal of Augustus by sharing with him the tribunician power' (*History of Rome* 2.99). However, at this stage Augustus was clearly superior to Tiberius in practice, even if in theory they shared some powers - not least because Augustus' tribunician power had been granted for life as part of the Second Settlement in 23 BC.

³⁸Suetonius, *Tiberius* 10; Cassius Dio, *Roman History* 55.9; Velleius Paterculus, *History of Rome* 2.99

³⁹Tacitus, *Annals* 1.53

repeated requests to return to Rome - effectively making Tiberius' retirement turn into exile.⁴⁰ During this period, Tiberius' wife Julia fell into disgrace, leading Augustus to end her marriage to Tiberius, by sending her a letter in Tiberius' name,⁴¹ and eventually exiling her to the island of Pandateria (Ventotene), asserting that she had been plotting against Augustus.⁴²

Unfortunately for Augustus, his plans for an imperial dynasty began to fall apart. Lucius died in AD 2, on his way to military training in Spain. Gaius was not far behind, being wounded on a campaign and dying on his return to Italy, with Livia suspected of involvement.⁴³ Augustus then invited Tiberius to return to Rome,⁴⁴ whereupon Tiberius was officially adopted by Augustus, had tribunician power conferred upon him for either three or ten years (his previous grant had expired),⁴⁵ and was sent off to command the Roman army against the Germans.⁴⁶

Death of Augustus

In AD 14, at the age of 75, Augustus died of natural causes.⁴⁷ By this point Tiberius already shared control of the provinces with Augustus, and held a census with the former princeps,⁴⁸ and so there was little doubt as to who would take over after more than 40 years of rule by one man. Tiberius, using his tribunician power, convened the Senate to inform them of the death of Augustus, and had the will of Augustus read out - in which Tiberius was to inherit two thirds of the late princeps' estate.⁴⁹ Although some time passed before Tiberius officially took on the role of princeps, he was effectively in charge from the moment Augustus died.

The accession of Tiberius was potentially complicated by the existence of Agrippa Postumus, the youngest son of Agrippa and Julia the Elder. However, given that Postumus had been exiled in disgrace by Augustus, he seems unlikely to have been a serious contender, especially as no principles for the transfer of power had been laid down by this point. It was not clear if the role of princeps was hereditary by default, or did the outgoing princeps choose a successor - possibly from outside his family, though adoption and marriage were always an option to bring a promising candidate into the family - or some other route (e.g. the Praetorian Guard had a hand in selecting later emperors). Regardless, Postumus was removed from the equation shortly after the death of Augustus, though our sources share the blame for this between Augustus, Livia, and Tiberius.⁵⁰ Some time after Augustus' death, Julia the Elder also died, banished and destitute (and the fault of Tiberius if Tacitus is a reliable

⁴⁰Tacitus refers to it as an exile 'passed off as "retirement"' (*Annals* 1.4).

⁴¹Suetonius, *Tiberius* 11

⁴²Pliny, *Natural History* 7.149

⁴³Cassius Dio, *Roman History* 55.10; Velleius Paterculus, *History of Rome* 2.102. Only Cassius Dio reports the suspected involvement of Livia, and provides no evidence to support this.

⁴⁴Cassius Dio, *Roman History* 55.11; Suetonius, *Tiberius* 14

⁴⁵Cassius Dio records ten years (*Roman History* 55.13), Suetonius 'another three years' (*Tiberius* 16). It is not clear what Suetonius means by 'another', but as grants were usually for five or ten years in other cases, Cassius Dio is more likely to be correct.

⁴⁶The adoption meant that Tiberius was now the step-son, son-in-law, and adopted son of Augustus - the latter possibly mirroring the adoption of Octavian (as Augustus was at the time) by Caesar, albeit in his will.

⁴⁷There were rumours that Livia had something to do with Augustus' death (Cassius Dio, *Roman History* 56.30; Tacitus, *Annals* 1.5), but it is clear that the sources are reporting suspicions, no evidence is provided, and natural causes was a perfectly plausible explanation for the death of a man who by Roman standards had reached a very old age.

⁴⁸Suetonius, *Tiberius* 21

⁴⁹Suetonius, *Tiberius* 23. This is a similarly large share to that which Caesar left to Octavian in his will (Suetonius, *Julius Caesar* 83).

⁵⁰Tacitus blames Tiberius and Livia, stating that Tiberius claimed that Augustus had left orders for Postumus to be killed, and clearly disapproves as he refers to the killing as 'murder' and 'the first criminal act of the new principate' (*Annals* 1.6). Suetonius tells a similar story, but spreads the blame more evenly and leaves open the possibility of the order having been given by Augustus (*Tiberius* 22). Cassius Dio leans more towards Tiberius being at fault, but also leaves the matter open to interpretation (*Roman History* 57.3).

guide).⁵¹

Relationship with the Senate

Tiberius had, according to our sources, a broadly positive relationship with the Senate, and involved them in decision making.⁵² Public and private business, foreign affairs, the appointment of military commanders and many other decisions were referred to the Senate by Tiberius.⁵³ Like Augustus, and possibly to a greater extent, he was willing to allow his motions to be opposed and even defeated on occasion.⁵⁴

In addition to deferring to the Senate on most matters, Tiberius also transferred the right to elect magistrates from the People to the Senate, which appears to have pleased the Senate without upsetting the People.⁵⁵ Having said this, whilst holding a magistracy may still have been considered an honour, under the principate all magistrates were, perhaps unsurprisingly, subordinate to the princeps in both theory and practice. For example, the princeps held *maius imperium* (greater imperium) which meant that decisions by magistrates could always be overruled, and together with additional powers such as that of tribune, and the loyalty of the army, meant that the princeps always had the final say (and in effect was not dissimilar to the office of dictator under the republican system).

However, Tiberius is said to have grown frustrated with a Senate which continually referred decisions to the princeps, despite his clear desire to delegate responsibility and concern himself with the empire as a whole, rather than dealing with every minor detail (and one could argue that this was part of the reason to continue appointing magistrates). Indeed, Tiberius is alleged to have said '*o homines ad servitutem paratos*' ('oh men ready for servitude') each time he left the Senate.⁵⁶ Despite this frustration, Tiberius appears to have done a good job of managing the relationship with the Senate, and in many ways continued the work of Augustus. If anything, Tiberius seems to have made a genuine attempt to involve the Senate, as opposed to Augustus' rather dubious claim to have restored the republic by returning control of the state to the Senate and People.⁵⁷

Relationship with the People

Tiberius' relationship with the People appears to have been one driven largely by indifference - he did not care for what the People felt, so long as they respected him.⁵⁸ He did not enjoy gladiatorial shows, unlike his son Drusus,⁵⁹ and limited their number.⁶⁰ He also imposed limits on actors and theatrical performances - going as far as to ban Senators from entering the houses of mime-actors⁶¹ - and severely punished anyone involved in factions between rival actors or other disorderly conduct,⁶² but nevertheless felt obliged to show his presence occasionally at the theatre.

Aside from gladiatorial shows and the theatre, one aspect which occupied Tiberius' mind was the supply of grain to Rome. As we saw earlier, Tiberius had already experienced the disorder which could occur if insufficient grain was available, and no doubt Augustus had also reminded him of the

⁵¹Tacitus, *Annals* 1.53; Suetonius, *Tiberius* 50; Cassius Dio, *Roman History* 51.18

⁵²Tacitus, *Annals* 4.6; Velleius Paterculus, *History of Rome* 2.126

⁵³Suetonius, *Tiberius* 30

⁵⁴Cassius Dio, *Roman History* 57.7; Suetonius, *Tiberius* 28

⁵⁵Tacitus, *Annals* 1.15

⁵⁶Tacitus, *Annals* 3.65

⁵⁷Augustus, *Res Gestae* 34.1

⁵⁸'Let them hate me, so long as they respect me' (Suetonius, *Tiberius* 59).

⁵⁹Tacitus, *Annals* 1.76

⁶⁰Suetonius, *Tiberius* 34

⁶¹Tacitus, *Annals* 1.77

⁶²Suetonius, *Tiberius* 37; Cassius Dio, *Roman History* 57.21

problems he encountered whilst a triumvir. Tiberius appears to have been reasonably successful in this respect, and even the often hostile Tacitus reports that when grain supplies did run low, 'no blame attached to the emperor'.⁶³

Expansion of empire

Augustus had laid down a rule that the empire should not be extended,⁶⁴ and whilst Tiberius was not strictly bound by this, he nevertheless made no serious attempt to push forward the frontiers and conquer substantial amounts of territory, or bring neighbouring provinces under Roman control, even though there was supposedly no limits.⁶⁵ In particular, Tiberius made no serious attempt to invade and pacify Britain, despite the fact that this had been considered several times under Augustus.⁶⁶ The barbarian inhabitants would have to wait until AD 43 to receive the benefits of Roman civilisation, when Claudius ordered four legions to mount a full scale invasion. Given that a garrison of three legions was required for most of the occupation, Tiberius perhaps made the right choice in deciding to limit the expansion of empire.

Sejanus

As Tiberius' reign went on, he became more distant, eventually leaving Rome for the final time for a villa on the island of Capri (still known by the same name today). In doing so he began to depend heavily on the services of Lucius Aelius Sejanus,⁶⁷ the Praetorian Prefect. Sejanus quickly came to control access to the princeps, and through this became probably the second most powerful man in Rome for a time. The prestige he enjoyed was reflected in the statues of him in Rome.⁶⁸

Unfortunately for Tiberius, and the inhabitants of Rome, Sejanus abused his position and attempted to grab even more power for himself. He first tried to marry himself into the family of the princeps, suggesting that he would make a good husband for Tiberius' niece Livilla - although this was politely declined.⁶⁹ He also feuded with Tiberius' son Drusus, who had at one point struck him across the face,⁷⁰ and arranged for him to be poisoned.⁷¹ With no son to share responsibilities with, Tiberius relied even more on Sejanus.

However, Sejanus' power came to an abrupt end in AD 31. At first things seemed to be going well, with Tiberius naming Sejanus as his colleague in the consulship, and implied that marriage into the imperial family and the powers of a tribune was also in the near future for the Praetorian Prefect.⁷² However, this was a ruse by Tiberius, who suspected Sejanus of plotting against him and had finally decided to take action.

Regardless of whether a plot existed - rumours of one may have been a post-event justification for Tiberius' actions - it seemed clear that Tiberius now wanted Sejanus removed. In particular, he seems to have been worried - justifiably or not - that Sejanus had become the man to whom the Senate and People looked to, and might one day proclaim him princeps.⁷³ This seems unlikely, especially given

⁶³Tacitus, *Annals* 4.6

⁶⁴Tactius, *Annals* 1.11

⁶⁵Virgil, *Aeneid* 1.276-279

⁶⁶Cassius Dio mentions planned expeditions to Britain by Augustus twice (*Roman History* 53.22.5, 53.25.2).

⁶⁷The letter 'i' was used as both a vowel and a consonant in Latin at this time, and would not morph into 'j' until much later, therefore in the original sources - and some translations - Sejanus is rendered as Seianus.

⁶⁸Tacitus, *Annals* 4.2, Cassius Dio, *Roman History* 57.21; Suetonius, *Tiberius* 65

⁶⁹Tacitus, *Annals* 4.39-40

⁷⁰Tacitus, *Annals* 4.3

⁷¹Tacitus, *Annals* 4.8

⁷²Suetonius, *Tiberius* 65

⁷³Cassius Dio, *Roman History* 58.4.1

Tiberius' position as head of the army, but paranoia is not based on logic or facts (and, it could be argued, Tiberius' habit of secluding himself and having Sejanus handle all incoming requests had at least in part caused this situation to arise in the first place). Eventually, Tiberius wrote a letter to the Senate, which did not completely denounce Sejanus, but contained various criticisms of his conduct and requested that Sejanus should be kept under guard, whilst stopping short of ordering his execution for fear of the disturbance this might cause.⁷⁴

After this the populace were baying for blood, smashing statues and pulling down images of Sejanus.⁷⁵ The Senate met and swiftly condemned Sejanus to death, with the sentence carried out immediately. Sejanus' body was thrown down the Gemonian Stairs - a common procedure following an execution - repeatedly trampled, and what remained was thrown into the river Tiber.⁷⁶ To what extent this reflected a genuine hatred of Sejanus, as opposed to a desire to be seen to attack and distance oneself from an enemy of the princeps, we can only speculate.⁷⁷

Despite the quick execution of Sejanus and the wiping of his images, Tiberius was still nervous and would not receive the senators and equites who went to meet him.⁷⁸ Sejanus' remaining children were also put to death - an overly harsh measure given that they appear to have had nothing to do with his alleged plotting.⁷⁹ This was in contrast with Octavian's treatment of the children of Mark Antony - whilst his eldest son was put to death, the others were adopted by his sister Octavia.⁸⁰

Later life and final years

The final years of Tiberius' reign were clouded by his continued withdrawal and refusal to come to Rome. The lack of obvious heirs also presented challenges for those looking towards a future successor, and after seeing what happened to Sejanus it would perhaps not be unsurprising if any ambitious candidates decided to play for time rather than make an obvious move to position themselves as the next princeps. The three main contenders from the imperial family were: Tiberius Gemellus (son of Drusus), Caligula (son of Germanicus) and Claudius. Gemellus was considered too young, Caligula too popular with the people (not a good thing in the eyes of Tiberius), and Claudius too lacking in intellect,⁸¹ although two of them would go on to become princeps despite these flaws.

Death and succession

Death came for Tiberius at the ripe old age (in Roman terms) of 77, on 16 March AD 37 - older than Augustus. If we believe the rather hostile tradition of Tacitus,⁸² Tiberius was thought to have stopped breathing and preparations were made to proclaim the next princeps, but then he began to revive and in a panic was smothered with blankets.⁸³ Suetonius reports multiple accounts of Tiberius' death, including the suggestion that he had been given a slow-acting poison by Caligula.⁸⁴ There was much

⁷⁴Cassius Dio, *Roman History* 58.10.1-2; Suetonius, *Tiberius* 65

⁷⁵Cassius Dio, *Roman History* 58.11.3; Juvenal, *Satires* 10.56-82

⁷⁶Cassius Dio, *Roman History* 58.11.5; Juvenal, *Satires* 10.83-110; Tacitus, *Annals* 6.25

⁷⁷Juvenal suggests that at least some of the corpse-kicking was done for show, with masters taking their slaves to watch so that there would be an eyewitness (*Satires* 10.83-110).

⁷⁸Cassius Dio, *Roman History* 58.13.1-3; Suetonius, *Tiberius* 65

⁷⁹Tacitus, *Annals* 6.9; Suetonius, *Tiberius* 61

⁸⁰Plutarch, *Antony* 81-82, 87. Caesarion, the son of Julius Caesar and Cleopatra, was also put to death, to ensure that there would be no one to counter Octavian's claim to be the heir to Caesar ('not a good thing is a multitude of Caesars').

⁸¹Tacitus, *Annals* 6.46. Tacitus also states that Tiberius predicted that Caligula would have 'all Sulla's vices and none of his virtues'.

⁸²Tacitus' summary of Tiberius is that he was noble under Augustus, but as princeps he became 'atrocious in his brutality' and 'erupted into an orgy of crime and ignominy alike' (*Annals* 6.51). Cassius Dio is slightly more balanced, stating that Tiberius had 'a great many virtues and a great many vices' (*Roman History* 58.28.5).

⁸³Tacitus, *Annals* 6.50; Cassius Dio, *Roman History* 58.28.3

⁸⁴Suetonius, *Tiberius* 73

rejoicing when the news broke, and many wanted Tiberius to meet the same fate of Sejanus, having his body thrown into the Tiber, but soldiers restored order and Tiberius was cremated.⁸⁵

A future talk, *Caligula*, will discuss the successor to Tiberius in more detail.

Conclusions

Was Tiberius a success as the second emperor? He faced a high bar, coming immediately after Augustus - who reformed the army, centralised control, brought peace and prosperity (for the Romans at least) and lasted so long that many people grew up knowing no one else in charge. Tiberius also had the difficult and unprecedented role of taking over from a previous emperor, with the need to provide continuity whilst also being able and willing to take his own decisions. The fact that he was clearly by no means the first choice of Augustus must have made the process even more challenging.

In many respects, Tiberius had a harder job than Augustus, as it was his role to manage the transfer of power, and to do so required - at this point at least (less so for some of the later emperors) - the impression of continuity. It is possible, perhaps even likely, that Tiberius emphasised this so much - more than was strictly necessary - that he ends up appearing to have had his hands tied by Augustus, with no real independent policies of his own. Of course it could be argued - quite persuasively - that Tiberius pulled this off so well, and for so long, that by the end of his reign there was no one of note who remembered life prior to the principate, and to nearly everyone the idea of rule by one man was simply how life was and there was no alternative to compare it to. At no point does Tiberius appear to have faced any major challenges to his leadership - with the possible exception of Sejanus - and if anything the Senate was too subservient.

In terms of the length of his reign, Tiberius can be considered a success. Although he did not last as long as Augustus, he still managed 22 years as princeps,⁸⁶ which is one of the longest periods for one man ruling both East and West.⁸⁷ He also died of natural causes - or, if we believe some of the sources, was dying and 'hurried along' by those around him - whereas many of his successors would die at the end of the sword, often wielded by the Praetorian Guard.

As for whether Tiberius was a 'good' or 'just' emperor, it is always difficult to judge historical figures by modern standards, and this is no exception. Although we have some sources closer to the time, the likes of Tacitus, Suetonius and Cassius Dio were writing decades or even centuries later, and it is often easy to criticise in hindsight. The most we can say is that Tiberius appears to have been somewhat more modest and competent than many of his successors, and he was likely a fairer princeps than Caligula (assassinated by the Praetorian Guard) and Nero (declared a public enemy and committed suicide).

Overall, we can perhaps say that Tiberius was a 'safe pair of hands' and engaged in 'business as usual' - he kept the empire running on roughly the lines Augustus laid down, managed the transition of power smoothly, and ensured that by the end of his reign the idea of a princeps was taken for granted. Not too bad for a man who does not appear to have wanted the office and undertook his duties with a great deal of reluctance.

Chronology

- 42 BC Birth of Tiberius.

⁸⁵Suetonius, *Tiberius* 75

⁸⁶It was not unusual for later emperors to last only a few years - or in some cases months or even days (e.g. the 'Year of the Four Emperors').

⁸⁷The Roman Empire was divided in two by Diocletian in AD 286, and later he expanded on this by appointing a deputy for each emperor.

- **6 BC** Tiberius 'retires' to Rhodes.
- **AD 2** Death of Gaius, grandson of Augustus.
- **AD 4** Death of Lucius, grandson of Augustus.
- **AD 14** Death of Augustus. Tiberius becomes second emperor of Rome.
- **AD 37** Death of Tiberius. Caligula becomes emperor.

Sources and further reading

We are fortunate that this time period is well documented, and many of the ancient sources are still available to us. There is also some further reading for those who wish to explore the subject in more detail.

Ancient sources

Our ancient sources are a mixture of Latin and Greek. For those unfamiliar with either language, English translations are available for all the major sources (e.g. Appian, Plutarch) in the Penguin Classics, Oxford World's Classics and Loeb Classical Library series (the latter retains the original language alongside the translation). More obscure sources (e.g. Velleius Paterculus) are only available in the Loeb series, as are some books of authors such as Cassius Dio.

Suetonius: Private secretary of Hadrian who wrote biographies of twelve men who held the office of emperor or its near equivalent, starting with Julius Caesar.

Cassius Dio: Roman statesman of Greek origin who wrote a history of Rome from the founding of the city to around 229 AD. Most of the 80 volume work exists only in fragments or quotations in other sources, but books 50-60 are largely complete and cover the period in question.

Tacitus: Roman historian and politician (c. AD 56 - 120) who produced multiple works, although large chunks are missing.

Velleius Paterculus: Roman soldier, historian, and senator who wrote a history of Rome. Although not generally considered a careful historical study, it is useful for its connected narrative of certain periods.

Orosius: Priest who wrote a history from a Christian perspective, approximately four centuries after Tiberius.⁸⁸

Further reading

From the Gracchi to Nero: A History of Rome 133 BC to AD 68, H. H. Scullard.

The Roman Empire, Colin Wells.

Tiberius the Politician, Barbara Levick (2nd edition).

Tiberius, Robin Seager (2nd edition).

Notes

The notes from this and other talks can be found online at: www.ancienthistory.org.uk

⁸⁸The most up to date English translation of Orosius, with an introduction and notes, is by A. T. Fear (Liverpool University Press).