

# 1 The motivations for writing history

Tacitus reached the pinnacle of his career as a senator when he was appointed consul in AD 97, and his election must almost certainly have been ratified by Domitian before the *princeps*' murder in 96. Tacitus had already prospered under Domitian's rule, since he had been made praetor in 88, by which time he had already been appointed to a priesthood. It is likely that Tacitus began writing his first work during the year in which he had served as consul, and it seems to have been published in the early part of the following year. This work, the *Agricola*, was not a history, but a biography of his father-in-law, Gnaeus Iulius Agricola, who had won especial renown while governing Britain in the seven years from 77 (or 78). The *Agricola* is part of a long tradition of Roman biographical writing, but in it Tacitus makes clear his feelings about recent history, coloured most clearly by his opinions of the late emperor.

## Writing biography: *Agricola* 1–2

1 The recording of the deeds and characters **of famous men** for future generations is a time-honoured custom, which even in the modern age our generation has not abandoned, indifferent though it is to its own achievements. This tradition has survived as often as **an individual of** great and noble **merit** has overcome and surmounted that fault which is common to both small and great states, namely 5 the jealous ignorance of what is right. But just as for previous generations there was an easier and more open field for achievements worthy of record, so too every man of the most notable intellect was encouraged to produce a record of distinction without partiality or self-seeking, but for the reward only of knowing

**of famous men** these words (the first in the Latin sentence) are the same as those which opened a historical work by the elder Cato, called the *Origines*. This was the earliest Roman history written in Latin, and Cato himself had been a dominant political figure in the first half of the second century BC. Why might Tacitus be choosing to echo this early republican work in the opening words of his biography?

**an individual of ... merit** this is a translation of the Latin word *virtus*, which Tacitus uses repeatedly in the opening of the *Agricola*. It is related to the Latin word for 'man', *vir*, and its range of meanings is based around excellence in those qualities which were seen as typical of a true man, although Tacitus also uses it (as here) to stand for human examples of excellence. It is not easy to use one English word or phrase in translation, and in these opening sections I have used 'merit', 'distinction', 'man of merit'.

he had done a good service. Indeed, very many considered the act of relating their own lives to be a sign of confidence in their own character rather than arrogance, and it was not incredible or a matter of censure for **Rutilius and Scaurus** to do so: to such an extent are men of merit best appreciated at the very times when they are most readily produced. But nowadays I have required indulgence as I am about to recount the life of a dead man, an indulgence which I would not have sought had I been about to write an invective: **so barbarous and hostile to merit is the age.**

- 1

Why do you think that Tacitus puts so much emphasis on the idea of excellence (*virtus*) in this opening section of the work? Does it suggest that Tacitus has greater ambitions than a simple biographical narrative for his work?
- 2

What impression does Tacitus give of contemporary Rome?
- 3

How does Tacitus portray the relationship between making history and writing history?

2 **We have read** that when **Thraseda Paetus had been eulogized by Arulenus Rusticus, and Helvidius Priscus by Herennius Senecio**, it was a capital offence: the rage was vented not only against the authors themselves, but also against their

**Rutilius and Scaurus** Publius Rutilius Rufus was a notable Stoic philosopher born soon after 160 BC, who reached the consulship in 105, but was in 92 prosecuted for extortion as governor in Asia. In exile, following his conviction, he wrote a personal memoir of his time, which became influential for later historians such as Sallust. Marcus Aemilius Scaurus, unlike Rutilius, came from a traditional noble family, defeated Rutilius for the consulship of 115 BC, and became the leading figure of the Senate for the following decades. Cicero refers to his autobiography as valuable but no longer read (*Brutus* 112). The works of both men are now lost.

**so barbarous and hostile to merit is the age** this is a typically pithy Tacitean comment, used to sum up the contents of a section in an epigrammatic manner.

**We have read** it is unclear from the Latin whether this verb is present or past. Tacitus perhaps chooses to use the verb ‘to read’ here because he was absent himself from Rome in AD 93, when these prosecutions occurred. However, the verb also emphasizes that the true account of events can be preserved in writing even in the face of the burning of books which Tacitus goes on to describe.

**Thraseda Paetus ... Herennius Senecio** Publius Clodius Thraseda Paetus was a Stoic senator who had been influential under Claudius and Nero, but he became disenchanted with the latter and withdrew from public life in AD 63–4. He was subsequently prosecuted for treason and committed suicide in 66 (on Roman attitudes to suicide, see note on p. 19). Gaius Helvidius Priscus, another Stoic, was Thraseda’s son-in-law and had been banished after his father-in-law’s condemnation. Upon his return a feud had continued with Thraseda’s prosecutor, Eprius Marcellus, and Helvidius flaunted his independence

books, with the task entrusted to **the triumvirs** of burning the memorials of the most distinguished minds in **the comitium and Forum**. Certainly **they believed** 5 that the voice of the Roman people, the freedom of the Senate, and the awareness of the human race were being obliterated with that fire. In addition there followed the expulsion of the professors of philosophy, and all good practice was driven into exile, so that nothing honourable should confront them anywhere. We have certainly given a striking lesson in submissiveness; and just as antiquity witnessed 10 the extremes of freedom, so we have the extremes of slavery, once the interaction of speech and listening had been taken away through a system of spies. We would also have lost memory itself together with our voice, had it been in our power to forget as much as to stay silent.

- 1

How does Tacitus emphasize the tyranny of Domitian’s reign in this passage?
- 2

When, and under what circumstances, have books been burnt in modern times? What does the act symbolize for us today?
- 3

What effect does Tacitus’ use of the first person plural have in the last two sentences?

of opinion. He was banished and exiled in 74 under the emperor Vespasian. Quintus Arulenus Rusticus was also a Stoic sympathizer and served as consul under Domitian in 92; at some point he published an account of Thrasea’s death, and was executed under Domitian in 93. Herennius Senecio was a friend of Pliny and refused to hold office under Domitian. He published an account of Helvidius’ death and like Arulenus was prosecuted for treason and executed in 93. These men were seen as part of the ‘Stoic opposition’ to the imperial regime under Nero and the Flavian emperors.

**the triumvirs** these three minor magistrates were known as *tresviri capitales* and had a police function in Rome under the command of more senior magistrates.

**the comitium and Forum** the *comitium* was an open area at the north-western end of the Forum next to the Senate House. Although it fell into disuse after changes to the Forum made by Caesar, it had served as the main meeting place for the Roman people during the republican period. It remained a traditional location for carrying out punishments.

**they believed** Tacitus presumably means Domitian and his close associates by ‘they’, but why does he choose to leave the subject unclear?

Tacitus describes Agricola’s career and achievements in the main body of the work, culminating in what his son-in-law saw as his completion of the conquest of Britain. Tacitus believed Agricola’s recall to Rome to be motivated by Domitian’s envy of his achievements – which is hardly fair, given that he had been allowed to serve as governor for the extraordinarily long period of seven years. Tacitus then describes how Agricola prudently retired from public life before his death on 23 August AD 93, a death which he alleges was eagerly awaited by the emperor: however, he at least offers the consolation that in many ways it was a timely end.

The fortunate timing of Agricola’s death: *Agricola* 44–5

44 With his daughter and wife surviving him, he can even seem to have been blessed to have escaped what lay ahead, while his status still remained intact, his reputation flourished, and his relatives and friends were unharmed. For although he was not permitted to live on until this dawning of a most blessed age and to see Trajan as emperor – an event which he used to predict in our hearing with prophecy and 5 **prayers** – he did enjoy the significant consolation of such **a hastened death** to



*The Senate House in the Forum Romanum.*

**prayers** it is typical of Tacitus’ style to make this addition even though it does not make sense with the verb he uses – it really means ‘and wish for in his prayers’.

**a hastened death** the Latin word for ‘hastened’ not only suggests that the death was premature but also hints that it might have been precipitated by foul play.



have avoided that final period, in which Domitian drained the state no longer with periods of respite and breathing-spaces, but incessantly and as if in one hail of blows.

45 Agricola did not see the Senate House besieged, the Senate beset with weapons, 10 the murder of so many ex-consuls in one and the same slaughter, and the exiles and banishments of so many of the noblest women. **Mettius Carus** still had only one victory to his count, **the noisy opinion of Messalinus was still confined to the Alban citadel**, and **Baebius Massa** at that time was still a defendant. Next



*The cryptoporticus (semi-subterranean gallery) of Domitian's villa in the Alban hills.*

**Mettius Carus** Mettius was a notorious *delator*, or prosecutor, under Domitian. Since there was no public prosecution service, such men were relied upon to bring accusations of treason against others. They received at least a quarter of the accused man's property if they brought successful cases, and were often seen as stooges of the imperial regime.

**the noisy opinion of Messalinus was still confined to the Alban citadel** Lucius Valerius Catullus Messalinus was another *delator*, who was known as 'the bringer of death'. Domitian had built a huge villa in the Alban hills on the site of the ancient city of Alba Longa, rather in the fashion of Hadrian's even more lavish subsequent villa at Tivoli. It is a 'citadel' in that it incorporated the ancient town, but the word also hints that it could be seen as the fortified base of the despotic emperor. Its ruins now lie in the grounds of the pope's summer residence at Castel Gandolfo.

**Baebius Massa** in AD 93 at the time of Agricola's death, Massa was being prosecuted by Senecio and Pliny for misconduct during his time as a governor in Spain. He was found guilty, but turned the tables and became an accuser, first of Senecio on the charge of impiety, and subsequently of his friends.

our hands delivered **Helvidius** into prison; the sight of **Mauricus and Rusticus** 15  
shattered us, and Senecio drenched us with his innocent blood. Nero, however,  
averted his gaze and simply gave orders for his crimes – he did not watch. An  
especial aspect of the miseries under Domitian was to watch and be seen: our  
sighs were recorded, and that cruel and ruddy complexion of his – **a redness with**  
**which he used to protect himself against a sense of shame** – was able to take note 20  
of the pallid faces of so many men.

You indeed were lucky, Agricola, not only for the distinction of your life, but also  
for the timeliness of your death. **As is related by those who were present for your**  
**last words**, you met your fate bravely and willingly, as if you could confer the gift  
of innocence on the emperor as far as any man could. 25

- 1 What consolations does Tacitus offer for Agricola’s death?
  - 2 To judge from these extracts, what other interests besides the life and virtues of Agricola does Tacitus have in writing this work?
  - 3 How does Tacitus portray Domitian’s regime in this section?
  - 4 How significant here is Tacitus’ repeated use of the first person? What effect does it contribute to his account?
  - 5 How would you describe the writing style of Tacitus in these sections?

**Helvidius** the son of the Helvidius mentioned in *Agricola* 2 (p. 10). According to Suetonius (*Domitian* 10), he was put to death for writing a play in which he seemed to allude unfavourably to Domitian’s divorce.

**Mauricus and Rusticus** Rusticus, according to *Agricola* 2 (p. 10), was put to death for his eulogy of Thrasea. Junius Mauricus was his brother and was banished at the same time, but he did outlive the emperor to return to Rome and prominence under Nerva and Trajan.

**a redness with which he used to protect himself against a sense of shame** the point is that Domitian’s naturally red face was able to disguise any blush that might otherwise have revealed his embarrassment. There is also a striking contrast of colours between the ruddy emperor and the faces of the senators, bloodless with terror. Physical description is a frequent feature of ancient biography since in ancient thought a person’s appearance was believed to reflect inner character traits.

**As is related by those who were present for your last words** Tacitus was absent from Rome at the time of his father-in-law’s death and had been for four years, almost certainly on official business in a provincial post, although it is not known where.

**Agricola and Domitian**

Compare section 45 with a slightly earlier paragraph which draws generalizations from the relationship between Agricola and the emperor.

Yet Domitian’s nature, although it was swift to anger and as determined on its purpose as it was hard to read, was nevertheless softened by the restraint and good sense of Agricola, because he did not provoke renown and ruin either by defiance or by the pointless parading of freedom. Let those whose nature it is to admire illegal actions realize that even under bad emperors there can exist great men, and that obedience and moderation, if they are partnered with application and energy, can achieve a level of glory that numerous men have gained by perilous courses, in winning fame with no benefit to the state through their ostentatious deaths.

(Agricola 42)

- What does Tacitus seem to admire here about Agricola?
- Is it possible to reconcile this passage with section 45? Could Agricola have continued to maintain the standards which Tacitus ascribes to him through the perilous final years of Domitian’s reign?

**Other minor works**

In the same year as the *Agricola* Tacitus also published a second short book, the *Germania*, the main focus of which is an ethnographic description of various German tribes. There is some comparison with Roman society and culture, both implicit and explicit, but Tacitus only returned to this subject more directly a few years later with the publication of a dialogue about the recent history of oratory in Rome, his *Dialogus de Oratoribus* (‘Dialogue on Orators’). As Tacitus was himself a notable public speaker, this subject was close to his heart. However, he distances himself from the subject by inventing a fictional setting for the work in which he pretends to recall a discussion that took place in AD 75 between three men, Marcus Aper, Vipstanus Messalla and Curiatius Maternus. The narrative prompt to this memory is the repeated questioning of Fabius Iustus, a friend of the younger Pliny, over the causes for the decline of oratory in Rome. Of the three interlocutors, Aper denies that such a decline has taken place, Messalla ascribes it to a neglect of the training of the young, whilst, most interestingly from a historical point of view, Maternus argues that the present, stable political system of the principate has rendered oratory relatively obsolete: the golden age of Cicero had flourished in a time of virtual anarchy in the late Republic.

It is clear that none of the speakers in the dialogue acts as Tacitus' own mouthpiece, but Maternus' speech raises questions which were to be pertinent to Tacitus' major historical writings, and which he had already touched upon in the *Agricola*, namely the role left for men other than the *princeps* to play within the principate. In this particular case, could orators thrive in a situation where there was little value in persuading a mass audience of an argument, since in reality all power lay in the hands of one man? Or was there simply now a need for a new style of oratory to suit the changed political circumstances in which Rome now found itself?

Introduction to the *Histories*: 1.1–3

It may have been soon after the publication of the *Dialogus* that Tacitus turned to the first of his major historical works, the *Histories*, because we know that he was collecting material for them in AD 105–6, when he consulted the younger Pliny for details concerning the eruption of Vesuvius in 79. The *Histories* were published in about 109. They covered the years from 69 to 96 inclusively, and so offered what was very much a contemporary history.

1.1 **Servius Galba, as consul for the second time**, and Titus Vinius, as a first-time consul, will be the start of my work. For many authors have narrated the preceding period of eight hundred and twenty years following **the foundation of the city**, as long as **the achievements of the Roman people** were related with equal eloquence and freedom: after **the battle took place at Actium** and it served the interests 5

**Servius Galba** he was the emperor in January 69, having seized power following the suicide of Nero in 68 by marching on Rome from Spain.

**as consul for the second time** Tacitus begins his account with the opening of the year and the assumption of office by the two consuls. It might seem a rather arbitrary point at which to begin his narrative, but it sets Tacitus firmly within the annalistic tradition of Roman historiography. This organized its narrative in a strictly year-by-year fashion (the word 'annalistic' derives from *annus*, the Latin word for 'year'), which was appropriate to the Republic with its system of government where new consuls entered office each year; however, under the principate it might seem less appropriate (see Introduction, p. 4).

**the foundation of the city** this was traditionally dated to 753 BC. The best known of such writers was Livy.

**the achievements of the Roman people** i.e. the history of the republican period, when the Roman people were not under the rule of one man.

**the battle took place at Actium** this happened in 31 BC, and Octavian (as Augustus then was known) defeated the combined forces of Antony and Cleopatra, leaving him the sole ruler of the Roman world. For all practical purposes it marked the start of permanent one-man rule in Rome.



of peace that all power should be entrusted to one man, that sequence of great intellects ended; at the same time truth was weakened in several ways, first by ignorance of affairs of state as if they were somebody else’s concern, then from a passion for flattery, or in turn out of hatred towards the masters. In this way neither group – neither the hostile nor the servile – had a concern for posterity. But while you may easily reject **the obsequiousness of a writer**, malicious disparagement is received with ready ears; the reason is that flattery entails the shameful accusation of slavishness, while spite has the false appearance of freedom. Galba, Otho and Vitellius were known to me neither to my detriment nor to my advantage. I would not deny that my status was **first advanced by Vespasian, enhanced by Titus, and carried much further by Domitian**. But those who lay claim to unadulterated truthfulness must narrate each reign without **affection** and untouched by hate. However, if a long life permits, I have set aside the principate of Nerva and the rule of Trajan – more fertile and safer material – for my old age, since **rare is the blessedness of the times when you can think what you like and say what you think**.

**the obsequiousness of a writer** of such authors Velleius Paterculus is unfortunate enough for his work to have survived: under Tiberius he wrote a history stretching from Greek mythology to AD 29 in only two books, which included passages of the following sort, in this case praising the emperor’s successful campaigning in Germany:

By the great gods, what a huge tome is needed for what we achieved the following summer under the leadership of Tiberius Caesar! The whole of Germany was traversed by our arms, races were defeated whose names were almost unknown, the tribes of the Cauchi were conquered again. All of their youth, although countless in number, physically huge, and protected very securely by the terrain, handed over their weapons. Together with their leaders they were surrounded by the gleamingly armed column of our soldiers and prostrated themselves in front of the commander’s platform (2.106).

**first advanced by Vespasian ... carried much further by Domitian** Tacitus came to Rome at some point in the reign of Vespasian (AD 69–79), who appointed him to some junior offices; he was appointed quaestor, and hence to membership of the Senate, under Titus in about 81, but rose to the highest ranks of the senatorial career during Domitian’s reign (81–96): he served as praetor, the second highest rank, in 88 (when he was also appointed to an important priesthood), and finally as consul in 97, although his election must have been ratified by Domitian before he was deposed and killed.

**affection** the actual Latin word is *amor*, meaning love, an exact antonym of the hatred which is also to be avoided. Compare also Tacitus’ claim in the preface of the *Annals* to write ‘without anger and partisanship’ (1.1, p. 22).

**rare is the blessedness of the times ... say what you think** this conclusion to Tacitus’ introduction is very famous, and is traditionally read as a celebration of the liberality of the current regime under which he was writing. However, it is possible to understand the words differently: can you think of other reasons why Tacitus might put off writing about Nerva and Trajan?

- 1 What are the major handicaps which Tacitus identifies for the writing of history under the principate?
  - 2 Is Tacitus right when he says that flattery in a historical account is easier to detect than unfair criticism?
  - 3 Why do you think that Tacitus is keen to give an outline of how his own career progressed during this period? Are modern historians ever similarly explicit about their own careers?
  - 4 Why do you think that Tacitus so formally adheres to the traditions of annalistic history, even to the extent of beginning his account on 1 January, when such a model perhaps seems less suited to writing a history where the emperors rather than the consuls are now the dominant figures in Rome?

1.2 I approach a work rich in misfortunes, terrible for its battles, riven with civil strife, violent even during periods of peace. **Four emperors died by the sword**; there were **three civil wars**, even more foreign ones, and very often a combination of the two; there was success in the East, failure in the West; **Illyricum** was disturbed, the provinces of Gaul faltering in their loyalty, **the whole of Britain** 5 **was conquered and immediately surrendered**; **the Sarmatians and the Suebi** rose against us, **the Dacians** were made famous by a series of battles in which success was enjoyed by both sides in turn, even the Parthians almost took up arms because of the laughable behaviour of **a false Nero**. Now indeed Italy was

**Four emperors died by the sword** Galba, Otho and Vitellius (all in AD 69), and Domitian (in 96).

**three civil wars** these were between Otho and Vitellius, Vitellius and Vespasian (both in AD 69), and Saturninus’ failed uprising in Germany against Domitian (in 89).

**Illyricum** this is the name often given to the three provinces of Dalmatia, Pannonia and Moesia, an area which rose up against Vitellius. They stretched from the eastern Balkans up to the Danube.

**the whole of Britain was conquered and immediately surrendered** a reference to the successes of Tacitus’ father-in-law, Agricola, against the Scots, which he felt were subsequently wasted by Domitian.

**the Sarmatians and the Suebi** these tribes lay along the Danube frontier (see map on p. 7).

**the Dacians** they occupied modern Romania, and fought a series of campaigns against Domitian; they were finally conquered by Trajan and their territory was turned into a Roman province, a campaign immortalized by the sculptural frieze on Trajan’s Column.

**a false Nero** Suetonius (*Nero* 57) records the appearance of this impostor at the Parthian court in AD 88 and his favourable reception there. Parthia had been Rome’s great enemy in the East, defeating both Crassus and Mark Antony before a diplomatic settlement was achieved under Augustus. However, the Parthians remained a potential danger to Rome’s control of her eastern provinces.