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TACITUS

Agricola
and
Germany



Translated with an Introduction and Notes by

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At dawn next day the scale of the victory was more apparent: the silence of desolation on all sides, the hills lonely, horns smouldering in the distance, not a man to encounter the scouts. They were sent out in every direction and reported that the fugitives' tracks were random and that the enemy were not massing at any point. As the summer was already over and the war could not be extended further, he led the army down into the territory of the Boresti. There he took hostages and instructed the prefect of the fleet to sail round Britain. Forces were allocated for the purpose, and panic had gone before. He himself, marching unhurriedly, to intimidate new peoples by the very delay with which he traversed their territory, ordered the infantry and cavalry in winter quarters. At the same time the fleet, with a favourable wind and reputation behind it, occupied the Trucculensian harbour, from which it had set out to coast along the adjacent shore of Britain, and to which it had now returned intact.

Agricola's Recall

39. Agricola's dispatches on this course of events, although not exaggerated by boastful language of any kind, produced a characteristic reaction on the part of Domitian: his expression was one of delight, but in his heart he was uneasy. He was well aware that his recent sham triumph over Germany had aroused ridicule—slaves had been purchased in the market, who could, with suitable clothing and their hair treated, be made to look like prisoners of war. But now he saw a genuine and great victory, with so many thousand enemy dead, winning unrestrained praise from the public. What he dreaded most of all was for the name of a subject to be exalted above that of the emperor.

In vain had public eloquence and distinction in civilian professions been brought to silence if someone other than himself were to snatch military glory. Other talents could be more easily ignored; good generalship belonged to the emperor. Tormented by such anxieties, he brooded over his resentment in silence—and this was a sign of his sinister intentions—and decided it was best to store up his hatred for the present and wait for the first burst of popular

applause and the enthusiasm of the army to wane. For besides, Agricola still held Britain. 40. Triumphal decorations, a public statue, and all the insignia that go with an honorary triumph were therefore decreed by the senate on the emperor's command, coupled with a flattering speech. Further, the impression was to be conveyed that the province of Syria was intended for Agricola, it being then vacant through the death of Atilius Rufus the consular and reserved for senior men. Many people believed that a freedman from one of the senior palace departments had been sent to Agricola, bearing an imperial letter of appointment to the Syrian command, under instructions to hand it to Agricola if he should still be in Britain. The freedman, it was said, met Agricola actually in the Channel crossing and, without even speaking to him, returned to Domitian. The story may be true, or it may be a fiction invented to suit the emperor's character. Agricola handed over to his successor a province peaceful and secure.

Agricola's Retirement and Last Years

So that his entry would not attract attention by crowds flocking to welcome him, he avoided the friends who wanted to pay their respects and came into the city by night, and by night also, just as he had been instructed, to the Palace. He was greeted with a perfunctory kiss and then dismissed without a word, into the crowd of courtiers.

From now on, to play down his military reputation, distasteful to civilians, he departed into the depths of calm retirement. His style of life was modest, he was courteous in conversation, with only one or two companions in public. As a result, most people, who always measure great men by their display, when they saw or noticed Agricola, asked why he was famous. A few understood. 41. He was often accused in his absence before Domitian, but in his absence was found not guilty. The reason why he was under threat was not any actual charge or a complaint from someone that he had been harmed, but simply the emperor's hostility to merit, the man's glory, and—the worst sort of enemy—those who sang his praises.

Indeed, in those years that ensued for the Commonwealth, *Agricola* could not be passed over in silence. So many armies had been lost, in *Moesia* and *Dacia*, in *Germany* and *Pannonia*, by the folly or cowardice of their generals, so many military men, with so many cohorts, had been defeated in battle and taken prisoner. It was no longer the frontier of the empire and the river-bank that were in question, but the permanent fortresses of the legions and Roman territory. So, with loss following on loss and every year marked by funerals and disasters, public opinion began to demand *Agricola* as general. Everyone contrasted his energy, resolution, and proven courage in war with the inaction and timidity of others. There is evidence that *Domitian's* own ears were stung by the lash of such talk. In this the best of his freedmen were motivated by loyalty and affection, the worst, out of malice and jealousy, worked on the feelings of the emperor, who always inclined to take the worse advice. Thus, alike because of his own virtues and because of the failings of others, *Agricola* was being driven to the precipice of glory.

42. The year had now come round for him to ballot for the proconsulship of *Africa* or *Asia*. The recent murder of *Civica* was both a warning for *Agricola* and for *Domitian* a precedent. Certain men privy to the emperor's thinking approached *Agricola* and asked of their own accord whether he was going to go to a province. At first just dropping hints, they praised the life of quiet retirement. Then they offered their help in supporting a request to decline. Finally, throwing off the mask, using persuasion and threats at the same time, they dragged him before *Domitian*. The latter had prepared his hypocrite's part, put on a majestic air, listened to the plea to be excused, and, after consenting, was graciously pleased to accept thanks for conferring a favour, without a blush for its invidious nature. However, he did not give *Agricola* the proconsular salary that is usually offered and that he had himself granted in some cases. It may be that he was offended that it was not requested, or perhaps he was ashamed to appear to have paid out money for something that he had forbidden.

It is part of human character to hate someone you have hurt. In fact, *Domitian* was by nature a man who plunged into violence and the more he concealed his feelings the more implacable he was.

However, he was mollified by the self-restraint and good sense of Agricola, who was not one to court renown and ruin by defiance and an empty parade of freedom. Those whose habit is to admire what is forbidden ought to know that there can be great men even under bad emperors, and that duty and discretion, if coupled with energy and a career of action, will bring a man to no less glorious summits than are attained by perilous paths and ostentatious deaths that do not benefit the Commonwealth.

43. The end of his life was a source of grief for us and sad for his friends. Even outsiders and strangers were affected. The common people, too, and the population of the city, usually otherwise occupied, kept coming to his house and talked about him in the market-places and at social gatherings. No one when they heard of Agricola's death was glad and no one immediately forgot it. The sympathy that was felt was increased by the persistent rumour that he had been poisoned. I would not venture to assert that we have any definite evidence. All the same, all through his last illness there were more visits from leading freedmen and court physicians than is usual with emperors who pay their visits by proxy, whether that meant anxiety or espionage. In fact, on the last day, as he was dying, it was known that the critical stages were being reported on by relays of messengers. No one believed that news that the emperor would have been sad to hear would have been speeded up like this. However, he did put on an outward show of grief in his manner and expression. He was relieved of the need for hatred, and he was one who could hide joy more easily than fear. It was no secret that when Agricola's will was read out, in which he named Domitian as joint heir with his excellent wife and most dutiful daughter, the emperor was delighted, taking it as a deliberate compliment. His mind was so blinded and corrupted by incessant flattery that he did not understand that a good father would only make a bad emperor his heir.

Epilogue

44. Agricola was born on the Ides of June in the year when Gaius Caesar was consul for the third time [13 June AD 40]. He died in his

fifty-fourth year, on the tenth day before the Kalends of September, when the consuls were Collega and Priscinus [23 August 93]. Should posterity wish to know something of his personal appearance too, he was a good-looking, if not particularly tall man. There was no trace of aggressiveness in his features, kindness abounded in his expression. You would readily believe him a good man, and be glad to think him a great one. He himself, although, to be sure, in his middle years, in the prime of life, when he was snatched from us, in terms of glory had completed the longest of spans. For he had attained to the full those true blessings which depend on a man's own virtues. He had been consul and had been awarded the triumphal insignia: what more could fortune have added? He did not enjoy excessive wealth, though he had a handsome fortune. His daughter and wife survived him, and he can even be regarded as fortunate, his rank unimpaired, at the height of his fame, his family and friends secure, to have escaped what was to come.

He was, it is true, not permitted to live to see the dawn of this most fortunate age and Trajan's principate, which he used to predict, observing the signs and praying for their fulfilment, in our hearing. Yet he took with him effective compensation for his premature death. He had missed that final period, when Domitian, no longer at intervals and with breathing-spaces, but in a continuous and as it were single onslaught drained the blood of the Commonwealth. 45. Agricola did not live to see the senate-house under siege, the senate hedged in by armed men, the killing of so many consulars in that same act of butchery, so many most noble women forced into exile or flight. A single victory was all that Carus Mettius as yet had to his credit, it was still only inside the Alban citadel that Messalinus was rasping out his vote, and Massa Baebius was still a defendant. But soon we ourselves led Helvidius to prison, the faces of Mauricus and Rusticus put us to shame, we were stained by Senecio's innocent blood. Nero at least averted his gaze: he ordered crimes to be committed but did not look on. A special torment under Domitian was to see him watching us, our very sighs being noted down against us, and all the while that savage gaze was able to mark down so many who had turned pale

with shock, that flushed face that saved him from blushing with shame.

You were indeed blessed, *Agricola*, not only in the brilliance of your life, but because of the moment of your death. Those who were present to hear your last words tell us that you met your fate with a cheerful courage. You seemed to be doing your best, as far as a man could, to acquit the emperor of guilt for your death. But for myself and for your daughter the pain of losing a father is increased by grief that we could not sit by your sick-bed, sustain your failing strength, sate our sorrow with a last look and last embrace. We should certainly have caught from your lips some instructions, some words to engrave for ever in our hearts. This is our special sorrow, this is what specially hurts us, that through the circumstance of our long absence he was lost to us four years earlier. Everything, there is no doubt, dearest of fathers, was done in abundance, by the devoted wife at your side, to honour you. Yet too few tears were shed as you were laid out; and there was something more that your eyes, in their final glimpse of light, had longed for.

46. If there is a place for the spirits of the just, if, as philosophers believe, great souls do not perish with the body, may you rest in peace. May you call us, your family, from feeble regrets and the weeping that belongs to women to contemplate your noble character, for which it is a sin either to mourn or to shed tears. May we rather honour you by our admiration and our undying praise and, if our powers permit, by following your example. That is the true respect, the true duty, of each of us closest to you. That is what I would enjoin on his daughter and his wife, that they revere the memory of a father and a husband by continually pondering his deeds and his words in their hearts, and by embracing the form and features of his soul rather than of his body.

Not that I would think of banning any statues in marble or bronze. But images of the human face, like that face itself, are weak and perishable. The beauty of the soul lives for ever, and you can preserve and express that beauty, not by the material and artistry of another, but only in your own character. All that we have loved in *Agricola*, all that we have admired in him, abides and is destined to

abide in human hearts through the endless procession of the ages, by the fame of his deeds. Many of the men of old will be buried in oblivion, inglorious and unknown. Agricola's story has been told for posterity and he will survive.