

Save Ancient Studies Alliance

Summer 2021 Texts-in-Translation Reading Group

The Making of a “Bad” Emperor: Tyrants and Hedonists?

Five days after the inauguration of Donald J. Trump as President of the United States, Jonathan Jones wrote [“To understand Trump, we should look to the tyrants of ancient Rome.”](#) Professors [Roberta Mazza](#) (University of Manchester) and [Katherine Blouin](#) (University of Toronto) were some of the earliest voices to problematize and rebuke Jones’ take for its lack of nuance, and perpetuation of elite White perspectives on the ancient world. While we will focus primarily on texts from Suetonius, Seneca, Tacitus, Herodian, and the *Scriptores Historiae Augustae*, these will be supplemented with key inscriptions that might help us account for more diverse perspectives on the “tyrants of ancient Rome” and their rules. This reading group will consider questions like: What exactly do the ancient sources say about the so-called “bad” emperors? What qualities made them “bad” and what does this reveal about contemporary social beliefs? (How) Can we make meaning of these texts in/for our communities? Join us, and share your thoughts on what descriptions of Caligula, Claudius, Nero, Commodus, and Elagabalus mean for your views on power and government.

Your SASA Educational Ambassador:

Victoria Muccilli (vmucc@yorku.ca)

PhD Candidate in Ancient History

York University, Toronto (Canada)

Twitter: @VNMuccilli



Dates (6/8-weeks):

Wednesdays @ 3pm EDT

- Session 1: June 30th
- Session 2: July 7th
- Session 3: July 14th
- Session 4: July 21st
- Session 5: July 28th
- Session 6: August 4th

Location:(Provided by SASA)

Zoom Meeting Link

<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/89999343106>

Zoom Meeting ID

899 9934 3106

Zoom Meeting Password

348958

Week 1 (Introduction + Caligula)

Suetonius, [Caligula](#)


Week 2 (Claudius)

Seneca, [Apocolocyntosis](#)

Week 3 (Nero)

Tacitus, Excerpts from *Annals* [XIV](#), [XV](#), [XVI](#)

See relevant readings at the linked document:

 SASA - "Bad Emperors"? - Nero Week Readings

Week 4 (Domitian)

Suetonius, [Domitian](#)

Week 5 (Commodus)

Herodian's *Roman History*, [Book 1](#)

Week 6 (Elagabalus)

SHA, Life of Elagabalus ([Part 1](#), [Part 2](#))

- Not required, but some may be interested to compare *SHA* with [Cassius Dio's account](#)

Group Size

Would like to have a smaller discussion group between 15-25 students

Additional Resources (By Week)

Week 1 (Introduction + Caligula)

Suetonius, [Caligula](#)

- See below for Lily's compilation of links/resources

Week 2 (Claudius)

Seneca, [Apocolocyntosis](#)

- A comparison of Claudius' reported speech before the Senate (48 CE):
 - Tacitus: <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/ancient/tacitus-ann11a.asp>
 - Inscription: <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/ancient/48claudius.asp>

Week 3 (Nero)

Tacitus, Excerpts from *Annals* [XIV](#), [XV](#), [XVI](#)

MAJOR EVENTS DURING NERO'S LIFETIME

All dates are AD

- 37 (Accession of Caligula)
- Probable Birth of Nero
- 39 Exile of Agrippina
- 40 or 41 Death of Gnaeus Domitius (father)
- 41 Accession of Claudius
- Recall of Agrippina
- 49 Marriage of Agrippina and Claudius
- Betrothal of Nero and Octavia
- 50 Adoption of Nero by Claudius
- 53 Marriage of Nero and Octavia
- 54 Death of Claudius
- Accession of Nero
- Tensions with Parthia
- 55 Death of Britannicus
- 58 Exile of Cornelius Sulla
- 59 Death of Agrippina
- 60 Rebellion of Boudica
- Exile of Rubellius Plautus
- 62 Marriage to Poppaea Sabina
- Deaths of Rubellius Plautus and Cornelius Sulla
- 63 Birth and Death of Daughter, Claudia Augusta
- Submission of Parthians
- 64 Fire of Rome
- Nero's Performance in Naples
- 65 Pisonian Conspiracy
- 66 Marriage to Statilia Messalina
- Death of Petronius
- Tiridates in Rome
- Conspiracy of Vinicianus
- Departure of Nero for Greece
- 68 Return of Nero to Italy
- Rebellion of Vindex
- Death of Nero

- Some bibliography on **ancient historiography** (general + Tacitus)

- Andrew Feldherr (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Roman Historians*, Cambridge UP, 2009
- C. S. Kraus, A. J. Woodman, *Latin Historians*, Oxford UP, 1997.
- T. J. Luce and A. J. Woodman (eds). *Tacitus and the Tacitean Tradition*, Princeton UP, 1993.
- John Marincola, *Authority and Tradition in Ancient Historiography*, Cambridge UP, 1997.
- John Marincola, *A Companion to Greek and Roman Historiography*, Wiley, 2009.
- John Marincola, *On Writing History: From Herodotus to Herodian*. Penguin Books, 2017.
- Ronald Syme, *Tacitus*, 2 vols. Clarendon Press, 1958.
- AJ Woodman, *Rhetoric in Classical Historiography*, Croom Helm, 1988.
- Writing under a so-called “bad” emperor
 - [Dying Every Day: Seneca at the Court of Nero by James Romm](#)
- A link to SASA's interview with Dr. Kara Cooney:
 - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DHbFZZOthh8>
 - Dr. Cooney is Professor of Egyptian Art and Architecture, and Chair of the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Cultures at UCLA.
 - [The Woman Who Would be King](#)
 - [When Women Ruled the World: Six Queens of Egypt](#)
- Some of the resources mentioned on women in the ancient world
 - [Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves | Sarah B. Pomeroy | - Wikipedia](#)
 - [Women's History and Ancient History | Sarah B. Pomeroy | University of North Carolina Press](#)
 - [Diotíma](#)

Week 4 (Domitian)

Suetonius, [Domitian](#)

- Online Coins of the Roman Empire: <http://numismatics.org/ocre/>
- Geoff W. Adams, “Suetonius and his Treatment of the Emperor Domitian’s Favourable Accomplishments.” *Studia humaniora tartuensia* 6.A.3 (2005): 1-15
 - <https://www.ut.ee/klassik/sht/2005/adams1.pdf>

- Brian W. Jones, *Domitian and the Senatorial Order: a Prosopographical Study of Domitian's Relationship with the Senate, AD 81-96*. Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1979.
- Antony Augoustakis, Emma Buckley, and Claire Stocks, "Undamning Domitian? Reassessing the Last Flavian Princeps: Introduction." *Illinois Classical Studies* 44.2 (2019): 233-241.

Week 5 (Commodus)

Herodian's *Roman History*, [Book 1](#)

Week 6 (Elagabalus)

SHA, Life of Elagabalus