

Historiographical Thoughts in Agricola and Germany

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Abstract. Publius Cornelius Tacitus, the great historian of ancient Rome, wrote Roman history with his unique perspective and sharp brushstrokes. Two of the most famous works, *Agricola* and *Germany* are impressive that deeply reflect Tacitus's own historical thoughts and the political concepts, which take moral history as the core, opposing tyrants and tyranny, advocating the republic system. The nostalgia for the age of republican virtue and the criticism of Roman monarchy are the mainly points that Tacitus wants to show to people. At the same time, the two works are important manifestations of Tacitus's achievements in historiography and have precious historical value. There are many factors that influence Tacitus historiographical concepts, mainly due to the times and personal backgrounds. Tacitus writes history with his strong moral sense and clear political attitude, which make him clearly different from other historians in ancient Rome, and form the unique style of Tacitus historiography.

Keywords: Tacitus, Historiographical Thought, *Agricola*, *Germany*.

1. Introduction

Tacitus's status as a great historian of ancient Rome is unshakable. His contribution to Roman historiography is praised by later generations. His works reproduce the features of the Roman Empire, and historiographical thoughts express his political demands and ideological concepts. He makes us realize that writing history is not just to record, but also to remember and praise. The unpretending customs that were gone, the precious virtues that were lost, Tacitus found them in the tribes called "barbarians" by the Romans. The sense of disparity, the sense of regret, the sense of nostalgia is what Tacitus's texts have shown to people through thousands of years of time.

Tacitus lived through three important dynasties of the Roman Empire between 55AD and 120AD, during the reign of Antoni dynasty, the Empire reached its peak, which was called the "Pax Romana". However, it is the essence of the development of things that prosperity must decline. Although the "Crisis of the Third Century" has not yet erupted, the decline and fall of the Roman Empire has begun to show its prominence.

Tacitus came from a wealthy family of equestrian rank and had extensive connections with the Roman elites. He studied eloquence and law in his early years, and was a student of the famous educator Quintilian. He married the daughter of *Agricola* in 78 AD, then ascended to the upper echelons of the Roman hierarchy. Tacitus wrote a lot of books in his life, including five major works. This article will discuss two of them, *The Agricola* of Tacitus and *The Germany* of Tacitus, hereinafter referred to as *Agricola* and *Germany*.

The Agricola was written around 98 AD, is a biography of Tacitus's father-in-law. The book is filled with praise for the virtues of *Agricola*. It is not only a biography of him, but also preserves the historical and cultural information of the ancient British, which has high historical value.

The Germany was written in about 98 AD with a total of 46 sections. Tacitus made a detailed account of the social organization, economic life and customs of the ancient Germanic tribes. Although there are errors, it is still the first historical data for the study of Germanic people.

The study is based on two works of Tacitus the *Agricola* and *Germany*, focused on Tacitus's historiographical thoughts in the view of moral and progressive concepts. The article cites a large number of original sentences of Tacitus to demonstrate the complex historical thoughts of him, which are both progressive and backward. Although Tacitus is a famous historian, he could not completely guarantee the objectivity of history writing and add a lot of moral preaching in his books, making the historical content more inclined to moral standards. But as a historian of the classical period, even

with a sense of helplessness, Tacitus could still recognize the progressive factors in history. Despite the constraints of the times, Tacitus's works are still distinguished historical works.

2. History Thought

2.1 Virtue and Tyranny in the View of Moral History

Thompson mentions in history of historical writings "Essentially Tacitus was a moralist. He regarded history as a textbook." [1] Pushkin has a unique view on the writings of Tacitus, thinking that Tacitus is "the whip that punishes tyrants." Indeed, Tacitus never stopped criticizing the tyrant and tyranny. He lambasted Nero as the sole perpetrator, ridiculed Domitian for his hypocrisy, hated informers who colluded with the emperor, and complained about the brutality of the empire through the mouths of Britons and Germans [2]. As Qin Ying points out in the article, "His (Tacitus's) historical narrative clearly shows the opposition between good and evil, especially the exposure of evil." [3] As Tacitus put it in his book, "An ill-starred passion to awake at an era when every man who came to the front was regarded askance, and pre-eminent fame was as dangerous as infamy" [2] Under the rule of tyrants, forbearance and silence were the only ways to save one's life. When Agricola returned to Rome in triumph, he was rewarded by the emperor's suspicions and doubts. The cruel, debauched, ugly and stupid Roman emperors, although they were regarded as sacred by many politicians, became hideous in Tacitus's writings. "If the souls of tyrants could be brought under the light of day, one would see the gashes and wounds; Just as a whip can scar the body, so passion and malice can scar the spirit." said by Tacitus [4]. He displayed all kinds of political darkness, attributed the root to the rampant tyranny and the loss of Roman virtue.

According to Roman history, Roman virtue could be concluded in four main points. The first is the dedication spirit of being loyal and brave to defend the country and willing to sacrifice; the second is the friendly folk customs of solidarity and mutual assistance; the third is the spirit of abiding by the law; the fourth is simple and pragmatic, does not like luxury, advocate labor, pay attention to a practical way of life and values. Jean-Pierre Nardoo mentions that "...the typical educated Roman was orderly, conservative, faithful, temperate, pious, stubborn, simple, practical... He will never know Plato, Archimedes, or Jesus Christ, but he will rule the world." [5] In the Agricola, Tacitus spoke highly of the virtues of his father-in-law. Praising him for being brave and resourceful, praising his modesty and prudence, praising his arrogance and not being aggressive, praising him for being unpretentious [2].

At that time, it was the lack of virtue that made Tacitus feel hesitant and confused. Biersch mentions that "The writings of Tacitus are filled with sadness" [6]. The collapse of virtue made Roman antiquity cease to exist. The spirit of loyalty, bravery and patriotism was destroyed by the villains who were greedy for life and fear of death. The friendly relations of solidarity were replaced by the vileness of the whistleblower and the suspicion of tyrants. The idea of the rule of law and order brought by the "Twelve Bronze Tables" were destroyed by the tyranny of the monarchy. The simple, kind, and labor-loving folk customs were replaced by extravagant pleasures and constant indolence.

While showing the virtue in his works, Tacitus satirized the moral corruption of Roman society. In his Germany, he demonstrated the simple customs of the ancient Germans. He had admired the strictness of the Germanic marriage system, in contrast to the Roman fornication of marriage. He praised the Germanic people's steadfast quality, not tempted by sensuality and feasting to despise the Romans' extravagant and hedonistic lifestyle. He believed that the customs and habits of Germanic people were far superior to other local laws, in order to satirize the Roman Empire even if it had the law of peoples, the society without virtue was still backward. Tacitus's writing style inherits an important tradition of Roman literature that is satirical artistic style. As Hegel mentions "The Roman world is the soil of irony." [7] Tacitus compared the vitality and fighting spirit of the Germanic people with the corruption and depravity of the Romans in order to miss the simple customs of the old Rome.

"In the time of our ancestors, courage was a better foundation for the Roman state than money," [8] Tacitus wrote. But now, the expansion of the empire has stimulated and amplified the greed of

human nature, making the virtues of Roman antiquity gone. Tacitus's critique of imperial tyranny and his longing for virtue are between the lines. A scholar believes that Tacitus writes history with the ruler of a moralist [9]. As a historian with a strong sense of morality, Tacitus showed the opposition between moral standard and historical standard. The moral standard was the main standard by which Tacitus viewed and evaluated history.

2.2 Republic and Monarchy under the Progressive Viewpoint of History

Tacitus was born in the Roman Empire, but his political vision was not a defense of the Roman monarchy. Instead, he expressed a strong dislike of the Roman monarchy, describing it as a society "under extreme slavery." In his works, he truly depicted various symptoms of the decline of the Roman Empire: the corruption of Roman officials, the successive military defeats, and the decline of oratory. As Hegel says that the narratives are of actions, events, and circumstances which they have seen with their own eyes, and in whose spirit, they have shared a common interest [10]. As a historian, Tacitus wrote Roman history from the eyes of a witness. It is precisely because of personal experience that Tacitus's brushstrokes of monarchy criticism were particularly sharp. He never tried to cover up the contradictions and darkness of the Empire but bravely exposed the "evil". In *Agricola*, he clearly stated that "Our forefathers had shown the world to what heights freedom could soar; when we dared neither speak nor listen for terror of informers, showed to what slavishness humanity could sink. Our mouths were closed, and even our memories themselves would have become a blank had we been as able to forget as we were kept silence" [2] to complain about the brutality and the slavery in the Roman Empire.

However, Tacitus respected the process of historical development; nostalgia for the Republican era did not mean that he had a tendency to be retro. Tacitus's conception of history is progressive, which is called progressive viewpoint of history in the study. Although he loved the Roman republic, he finally had no choice but to admit the shaking of the ancient moral foundation and the inevitable transformation of the republic to the monarchy. "The world has changed," he mentioned. "The old, precious and unpretending Roman style has disappeared. Political equality has become an outdated belief." [11]

Tacitus once had long hoped for monarchy, "Will we be able to take control of our own destiny, to blaze a path free from intrigue and danger between reckless obstinacy and vile servility." [11] But the cruelty of reality made Tacitus's historical thought present a sense of helpless compromise. He had to admit that under the expansion of the Roman Empire, the changes caused by the drastic changes in domestic politics and economy were an irreversible trend. Tacitus believed that "in the face of ever-expanding territory and the increasing complexity of internal and external affairs, the system previously used to govern a city-state obviously could not adapt. During this period, the system of Rome must be adjusted and modified to adapt to constantly changing situations. In a special period of Roman history, there was a situation in which all power was temporarily concentrated in the hands of a dictator... But when Augustus was in power, the autocratic system was hidden under the republic system, which was the principate." [11] Although Tacitus was exploring and exposing the darkness of the monarchy, he did not completely deny it. He acknowledged the inevitability of the monarchy to replace the republic, insisting that the quality of the monarchy depends on the emperor. In fact, Tacitus did not oppose monarchy but tyrants.

It was just seeing the brutality of the Roman Empire that made him look forward to democracy of the republic. It was precisely because people were suppressed by the Roman Empire that made him miss the freedom of the republic. In the Germany, Tacitus praised the simple military democracy, as mentioned in *Germany* "They choose their kings for their noble birth, their generals for their prowess: the king's power is neither unlimited nor arbitrary, and the generals owe their authority less to their military rank than to their example and the admiration they excite by it..." [2] It was actually a stark contrast between the selection method of the Germanic tribe leaders and the emperors of the Roman Empire. The Germanic tribe generals were used to lead by example and fight bravely to criticize the

corruption and interference of the Roman generals, against the tyrannical and brutal Roman emperor through the simple Germanic national atmosphere.

The Germanic attitude towards women was mentioned in the book. "They never looked down on women, consulted with them and respected their opinions." [2] During the Roman Empire, the status of women and slaves was extremely low, but the simple Germany had an attitude of respect for women, and slaves were not as severely exploited as in Rome. The slaves of the Germanic tribes "each of them has his own house and a family. The master only takes a certain amount of grain, cattle, and clothing from the slave. It is rare to whip a slave, imprison a slave, or punish a slave for drudgery." [2] Accordingly, Tacitus showed a slap in the face of the Roman Empire through the depiction of Germanic tribes, the actual expression was the disgust for the monarchy and the nostalgia for the republic.

3. Reason for Historical Thought

The emergence of historical things is at a certain stage of historical development and is the result of the collision of specific era backgrounds and personal factors. As a famous historian of ancient Rome, exploration of Tacitus' historical thought and causes cannot be separated from the investigation of personal identity and background.

3.1 Early Life and Education

The personal experience of being ruled by tyrants for a long time has profoundly influenced Tacitus's historical thought. He experienced the debauched and dark rule of Nero in his childhood, then went through the chaos of civil war during the period of the "Four Emperors". The rule of Vespasianus and Titus of the Flavian Dynasty was relatively stable, but when Domitian came, tyranny returned to the world. When Domitian was assassinated, Nerva who was famous for his virtue, took over as emperor, opening the "period of five virtuous emperors" in Roman history. Although the era of virtue finally came late after suffering, Tacitus has heard and witnessed the brutality of the emperors of all dynasties, and experienced the destruction of personality by autocratic rule. His political experience determines his criticism of the monarchy and tyrants.

Secondly, Tacitus's historical concept is related to the teacher's education and personal moral character, whose teacher Quintilian advocates moral power. Tacitus's early years of apprenticeship made him fascinated by moral concepts, which were finally reflected in his works. From a philosophical point of view, Tacitus's view of moral history is similar to that of the Stoics. The Stoics emphasis on moral values, responsibility and justice may be another source of Tacitus's view of moral history [12].

Tacitus's political experience and ideological concept finally determined the image of the Roman emperor in his writings. In his long political career, his in-depth experience and careful observation of Roman political affairs formed one praise and one criticism, celebrating the virtues of the republican era and belittling the decadence of imperial politics [13]. It is precisely because the reality is so different from his ideals that his political ambitions are difficult to display, Tacitus devoted himself to historiography.

3.2 The Identity Background

To explore the causes of Tacitus historiography is inseparable from the important factor of character identity. Tacitus was born in the equestrian rank as mentioned above. This determines that Tacitus was fundamentally different from the traditional Roman elite, but a rising star, belonging to the Roman upstart. Naturally, instead of completely defending the Roman monarchy, he pointed out the shortcomings of the autocracy and made a sharp critique.

In the early days of the monarchy, the emperor and the Senate fought fiercely, the nature of this was still largely a struggle between the monarchy and the remnants of the republic. Tacitus's family

and career were closely related to the Senate, and it was bound to be influenced by it in terms of political views.

So, Tacitus was emotionally on the side of the Roman monarchy. Although he had to admit the reality, he was obsessed with the ideal republic.

3.3 Time Background

Furthermore, in the early days of the empire, the foundation of the Roman monarchy was not stable, and the idea of republicanism still existed. In the fierce confrontation between old and new values, if the monarchy could not show obvious advantages, the idea of republicanism was bound to be a problem for historians who saw the chaos of Roman society. Although republic politics has lost its social and economic foundation for survival, it has become a historical necessity to be replaced by monarchy. But the idea of a republic that has been bred for hundreds of years has long been ingrained in people's hearts. Rome will always be a city-state. During the Roman Republic, a typical city-state system was implemented. The Romans were proud of their freedom and democracy, and believed that a good demeanor was a national virtue. Although the city-state system gradually declined with the expansion of Rome's territory, people have long been accustomed to it and have become a political force that cannot be ignored. Tacitus's yearning for republic was also his nostalgia for a city-state. The yearning and nostalgia pinned his political ideals. Therefore, after seeing through the slavery and brutality of the Roman monarchy, Tacitus sought democracy and freedom in a way of nostalgic republic.

3.4 The Historical Tradition

The moral history view revealed by Tacitus in his works is not an isolated phenomenon by chance, but it is an inherent tradition of Latin historians. The Roman historian Sallust Crispus, who wrote *The War of Jugurtha* and *The Catiline Conspiracy*, aiming to expose the darkness of the senate and aristocrats in the later period of the republic through the moral decline of Roman society. He convinced that the root cause of the moral downfall, national disasters, all evils and conspiracies was greed of people for wealth and money, "Greed, incompetence and arrogance" are the breeding grounds for the decay of Roman society and are the most ferocious natural enemies of morality. Following Sallust Crispus, the famous Roman historian Livy and his historiography practice in the early years of the empire can also be recognized from the perspective of moral history. Livy emphasized the moral factors that determine the rise and fall of human beings in the historical development process, and believed that the greatness of Rome stemmed from its lofty moral customs, and the decline of Rome stemmed from the decline of morality [14]. From Cato the Elder in the middle of the republic to Sallust Crispus in the end of the republic, to Livy and Plutarch in the early imperial period, many Roman historians regarded moral factors as a way to examine and reflect on history and present reality. The reason is not only that the moral concept is a striking historical tradition in Roman historiography, but also that the social reality of Rome's decay has made generations of historians unable to ignore the relationship between moral factors and Roman destiny.

Tacitus's historical thoughts have rich sources. First of all, historical background and personal experience play a crucial role. Secondly, there is the inheritance of the historical thought of the previous generation. Finally, it is influenced by philosophical thought. Tacitus's historiographical thoughts center on moral history, which are mainly manifest in opposing tyranny and advocating republic.

4. Conclusion

Tacitus's historical thought not only inherits the tradition of Latin historiography, but also incorporates Tacitus's understanding of the progress of historical development. In Tacitus's view, human history is a moral history, and the fundamental purpose of writing history is to "punish evil and promote goodness". Although he acknowledges the "inevitability" of the republic turning to the

monarchy, he uses his moralist influence to make people put aside this “inevitability”, immersed in his moral preaching, and take a glimpse of it reveals a truth that the fireworks-like splendor on the surface of the empire is equal to the endless loneliness and noise.

In his two works *Agricola* and *Germany*, Tacitus deeply reflects the decline of the times and the hesitation in his heart. The two works concentrate on the historical thoughts of Tacitus, taking moral history as the core, opposing tyrants and tyranny, advocating the republic system, which are based on background and conditions of the times. In *Agricola*, Tacitus highly praises the virtues of his father-in-law in order to show the best public morals of Roman society and complain about the social depravity of the Roman Empire, which expresses his appeal for virtue and critique for tyranny. In *Germany*, Tacitus uses satirical writing style to describe the unpretending folk customs of the Germans, but actually expresses his opposition to the oppression and undemocraticness of Roman society under the monarchy. The two works vividly embody Tacitus’s historical and political concepts that are the nostalgia for the age of republican virtue and the criticism of tyrants and tyranny. At the same time, the two works are also important manifestations of Tacitus’s achievements in historiography and have precious historical value.

Tacitus’s historical thoughts are influenced by time factors and personal identity. Based on his early years of politics and learning experience, he has a deep feeling for tyranny. He is closer to the Roman republic in ideology than Roman monarchy because he comes from an equestrian family and has close contacts with the Roman senate. In the background of the early empire, the fierce confrontation between the monarchy and the republic and the remnants of the republican thought play an important role in Tacitus’s vision of politics and history. The Latin historian’s tradition of writing history that pays attention to moral standards also influenced Tacitus’s historiographical thought and writing characteristics.

Therefore, Tacitus believes that it is the moral decay that pervades the Romans and prevails at all levels of society that ultimately destroys the republic, and that the monarchy as a substitute is a freak of the Romans’ moral decay. It is the natural internal decay of autocratic tyranny that ultimately and fundamentally destroys the moral foundation of the Romans, which is already weak at this moment, and the establishment of the monarchy further aggravates and deteriorates the Romans no longer existing ethnics.

The tradition of moral history view has been widely recognized in academic circles, but Tacitus’s progressive view of history still needs to be discussed and studied. Chinese scholar Chu Xinguo published an article titled “The Circular History of Tacitus” in 2006, putting forward the view of Tacitus’s Circular History earlier in China. He believes that “Tacitus firmly believes in human society that history tends to decline and fail in a cyclical cycle.” [15] In addition, the study has shortcomings. For example, due to domestic restrictions and the author’s own reasons, the reference materials are mainly in Chinese, and the research results of foreign scholars have not been fully paid attention to. The first-hand materials only examine two works of Tacitus, but do not fully pay attention to the views on Tacitus by contemporaries and scholars of the neighboring era, and the research on the original historical materials is insufficient.

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