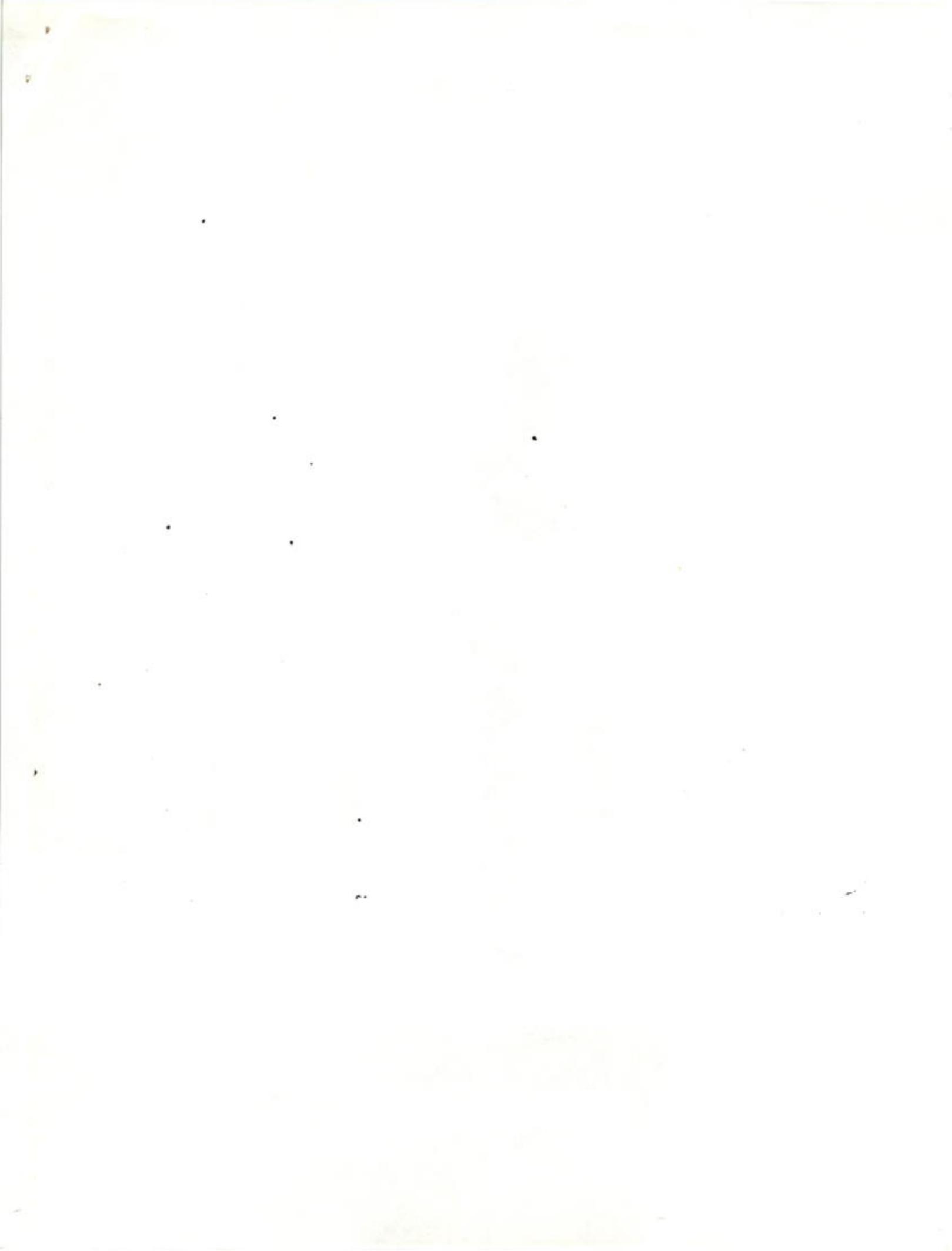


Lucius Aelius Sejanus

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Introduction

Lucius Aelius Sejanus' bearing on church history is not immediately apparent to the church historian. He is well known among Roman historians as the man who almost succeeded in overthrowing Tiberius Caesar. However, his relationship with Pontius Pilate has an important influence on what year one dates the death of Jesus. The purpose of this paper is to give an overview of Sejanus' life, to examine his relationship with Pilate, and finally to understand the impact of this information on the date of Jesus' death.

An Overview Of Sejanus' Life

Birth and Youth

Sejanus was born sometime between 4 BCE and 1 BCE in Etruria.¹ He was born into an equestrian family and thus was not part of Roman nobility. Virtually nothing is known about his youth.

Shortly after Tiberius became emperor in 14 CE, he made Sejanus' father Strabo commander of the Praetorian Guard, the elite corps of Roman soldiers responsible for protecting the city of Rome and the emperor himself.² Strabo was one of Tiberius's most trusted administrators. He was awarded this post because of his life-long loyalty and service to Tiberius.³ The earliest reports of Sejanus' adult life place him in Rome with Strabo at this

¹Charles Edward Smith, Tiberius and the Roman Empire (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1942), p. 116.

²Evidently, Sejanus held this position with his father Strabo already at this time. See Robin Seager, Tiberius (London: Eyre Methuen Ltd, 1972), p. 178.

³ J. C. Tarver, Tiberius The Tyrant, p. 385.

time. Thus, Sejanus almost definitely grew up knowing Tiberius personally and had easy access to him, an advantage which he was to later exploit.

Early Career

In 16 CE, Sejanus was appointed Commander of the Praetorian Guard by Tiberius when he made Strabo prefect of Egypt.⁴ Sejanus distinguished himself by significantly improving the organization of the Guard. Whereas they had previously been quartered haphazardly with friends and neighbors, Sejanus built barracks for them so that they could be more quickly mobilized in time of need.⁵

In 17 CE, Sejanus was sent by Tiberius to accompany Drusus to suppress the mutiny of the Pannonian legion.⁶ Drusus was the son of Agrippina and Germanicus, who was seen as the heir-apparent to Tiberius. Again, Sejanus distinguished himself in this assignment and was rewarded for it by Tiberius. This may have been interpreted by Drusus as a lack of confidence in him by Tiberius and thus contributed to Drusus' enmity and rivalry toward Sejanus. Certainly this attitude toward Sejanus emerged after Drusus' father Germanicus died in 19 CE and Drusus became the heir-apparent.⁷

In 23 CE, a fire broke out in a theater in Pompeii which ravaged the city. Sejanus was assigned to handle the situation and restore the city. He

⁴ Charles Edward Smith, Tiberius and the Roman Empire, p. 117.

⁵ Robin Seager, Tiberius, p. 178.

⁶ Charles Edward Smith, Tiberius and the Roman Empire, p. 117.

⁷ Augustus designated his step-son Germanicus to be his successor. Tiberius was seen as an emperor-regent for Germanicus until he came of age. This is why after Germanicus' premature death, his wife Agrippina began to clamor that her son Drusus was the rightful successor. See Frank Burr Marsh, The Reign of Tiberius (London: Oxford University Press, 1931), p. 160.

did such an effective job that Tiberius ordered a statue of Sejanus in his honor be erected at the site of the new theater.⁸

Thus, Sejanus's early career gave clear evidence of excellent administrative ability. Always looking for someone who could ease the burden of administration, Tiberius evidently was impressed by Sejanus's work. Tiberius thus continued to depend more and more on Sejanus and take him into his confidence.⁹ This set the stage for Sejanus's rise to power.

The Rise of Sejanus

In 23 CE, Drusus died after a short, violent illness. Most Roman historians state that Drusus' death was actually due to being poisoned.¹⁰ This explanation is based the testimony of Sejanus' wife shortly before she was executed in 31 CE. She stated that Sejanus and Drusus' wife Lavilla had become lovers and that they had conspired to kill Drusus so that Sejanus could take his place as heir-apparent to Tiberius. Both the goal of Sejanus' ambitions and the real cause of Drusus' death is ambiguous and much debated by modern historians.¹¹

At any rate, with Drusus dead, Tiberius was in an unenviable spot. Now 64 years old, he had for years wanted to retire from public life, leaving the leadership of the empire to his successor and the Senate. Now he was

⁸ Robin Seager, Tiberius, p. 179.

⁹ J. C. Tarver, Tiberius The Tyrant, p. 391.

¹⁰ Tacitus, Annals (hereafter Tac. Ann.) 4&; Dio 57.2.2f.; Seutonius, Tiberius (hereafter Seut. Tib.) 62.1.

¹¹ Seager seriously doubts this explanation of Drusus' death (see Robin Seager, Tiberius, p. 184,185). Marsh seems to take the story at face value (see Frank Burr Marsh, The Reign of Tiberius, p. 164). Smith thinks this is a possibility, but sees Sejanus motivated by self-preservation more than imperial ambition (see Charles Edward Smith, Tiberius and the Roman Empire, p. 122).

unable to do so. The oldest male family members were Drusus' children (Drusus, Nero and Gaius), and they were too young to be appointed co-emperors.¹² In presenting these children to the care of the Senate, Tiberius lamented his situation and even expressed a longing for the return of the Republic.¹³ Tiberius knew that his desire for the Senate to take a more active role as they did in the Republic was unrealistic. Therefore, he knew he would be unable to retire until one of these children grew to adulthood and demonstrated competence, unless he had an administrator so competent and trustworthy that he could safely leave the government in his hands as his regent in Rome. It was to this position that Sejanus immediately aspired. In Tiberius, he found a man strongly motivated to let him attain that role.

As Tiberius gave Sejanus more and more authority, Sejanus used his position to eliminate those who were obstacles to his goal of ultimate power. In 25 CE, he had Cordus, a historian, condemned, ostensibly for justifying Brutus' assassination of Julius Caesar. Roman historians state that the real reason was that Cordus was an outspoken enemy of Sejanus.¹⁴

In 26 CE, Tiberius retired to the remote and almost inaccessible island of Capri, never to return to Rome again.¹⁵ Sejanus had played a major role in convincing Tiberius to do this.¹⁶ He also "proved" his total loyalty to Tiberius by shielding Tiberius with his own body during a cave collapse that

¹²Nero was about seventeen at this time. Drusus and Gaius, twins, were about fourteen years old. See Frank Burr Marsh, The Reign of Tiberius, p. 164.

¹³Tac., Ann. 4.9.

¹⁴Tac. Annals 4.34f; Seut. Tib. 61.3. cited in Robin Seager, Tiberius, p. 194.

¹⁵The exact date of Tiberius' departure from Rome is not stated in any of the extant histories.

¹⁶Sejanus did not persuade Tiberius to make this move; he only played upon this desire that Tiberius already had (see Robin Seager, Tiberius, p. 202).

year.¹⁷ While still retaining his full imperial authority, he left Sejanus in Rome as his regent. From this point on, Sejanus' power increased dramatically. He was not only Tiberius' spokesman, which made the senators curry his favor; he also carefully controlled all communications to Tiberius on Capri.¹⁸ In this way, Sejanus was able to prey on Tiberius's fears of revolt and use him to eliminate the legitimate successors of Tiberius. Whether Sejanus was actually aspiring to become emperor, or only seeking to eliminate possible heirs so that he would not be eliminated by them when they came into power is not clear.¹⁹ What is clear is that he used his position to eliminate them.

Immediately after Tiberius left Rome, Sejanus attempted to set Agrippina and her grandsons against each other. Through his own agents, Sejanus tried to convince Agrippina and Nero to leave Rome for their safety.²⁰ Through the same agents, he was sending a steady report to Tiberius of their activities, attempting to convince him that they were plotting revolt and should be executed. For the rest of 26 CE, neither plan worked. Agrippina and Nero did not flee Rome, and Tiberius was not yet convinced that they constituted a serious threat to his power.

In 27 CE, Sejanus had Sabinus, a supporter of Agrippina, condemned for sedition.²¹ In the same year, he asked Tiberius for permission

¹⁷ Tac. Ann. 4.59 cited in Charles Edward Smith, Tiberius and the Roman Empire, p. 133.

¹⁸ J. C. Tarver, Tiberius The Tyrant, p. 402.

¹⁹ Smith believes that Sejanus hoped at the most for becoming guardian of an under-age heir, and that he was motivated by self-preservation to do away with Drusus. See Charles Edward Smith, Tiberius and the Roman Empire, pp. 121,122.

²⁰ Charles Edward Smith, Tiberius and the Roman Empire, p. 135,136.

²¹ Robin Seager, Tiberius, p. 207.

to marry Lavilla, Drusus' wife.²² This would have gained him greater legitimacy with the Roman nobility and improved his chances of actually becoming emperor. Tiberius refused to grant permission, seemingly out of deference to Roman etiquette, while promising Sejanus much greater honor and fame and power in the near future:

"What projects I have turned over in my mind; by what further ties I am preparing to bind you to myself, I will forbear for the present to disclose. This only I will permit myself to say, that there is no place too high for your merits, and your devotion to myself; and when the proper time shall come, whether in the Senate, or before the public, I shall not fail to speak."²³

Historians disagree on Tiberius' motives for his reply. Some think that Tiberius should be taken at face value, and that he still fully trusted Sejanus.²⁴ Others think that Tiberius was suspicious of Sejanus by now, but also realized that he was in a precarious position since he was in Capri and Sejanus was in control.²⁵ If this was the case, Tiberius' reply was calculated to block Sejanus' power move, without arousing Sejanus' suspicions that Tiberius suspected him of revolt.

The Peak of Sejanus's Power

Sejanus reached the peak of his power in 29 CE. Tiberius' mother died during this year, yet he refused to come to her funeral in Rome. This is probably because he had begun to believe Sejanus' charges that Agrippina

²² Frank Burr Marsh, The Reign of Tiberius, p. 177.

²³ Tac. Ann. 4.40.

²⁴ Marsh sees it as clear intention that Tiberius was going to confirm Sejanus as his successor (see Frank Burr Marsh, The Reign of Tiberius, p. 175,176).

²⁵ Seager quotes Dio in contending that Tiberius knew at least by 30 CE of Sejanus' designs and used such flattery to keep Sejanus off guard until Tiberius could safely eliminate him (see Robin Seager, Tiberius, pp. 217,218).

was actively seeking to assassinate him.²⁶ Later that same year, Tiberius accused Agrippina (by letter before the Senate) of adultery and Nero of "vices".²⁷ Both were exiled, where Nero eventually committed suicide and Agrippina, after being ill-treated by her guards, starved herself to death.²⁸ He also got Tiberius to condemn and imprison Drusus, where he committed suicide.²⁹ Only Gaius (now seventeen but with no administrative experience) and Gamellus, a boy of ten, remained alive as heirs from the Julio-Claudian line.³⁰ Gaius lived with Tiberius on Capri at this time, making him inaccessible to Sejanus.

In early 30, Sejanus had Gallus, another supporter of Agrippina, condemned for sedition.³¹ When Sejanus got permission from Tiberius to marry Livia Julia (Gaius' sister), he was in a seemingly very advantageous position. With a marital claim to nobility, he was in a better position to be accepted by the nobility if he attempted to seize imperial power. If that route was deemed seemed infeasible, he could persuade Tiberius to appoint him Gaius' supervisor when Tiberius died and thus still retain full control over the Emperor.³²

During 30, Sejanus also began to consolidate his power over the Roman armies in foreign lands. He probably realized that in the event of a

²⁶ Charles Edward Smith, Tiberius and the Roman Empire, p. 137.

²⁷ Frank Burr Marsh, The Reign of Tiberius, p. 185.

²⁸ Robin Seager, Tiberius, p. 211. This was the first instance of Roman nobility being beaten while under imperial exile.

²⁹ Frank Burr Marsh, The Reign of Tiberius, p. 187.

³⁰ Robin Seager, Tiberius, p. 213.

³¹ Charles Edward Smith, Tiberius and the Roman Empire, p. 141.

³² Smith calls this the attainment of Sejanus' long cherished goal of a marital alliance with the Julian House.

revolt they could crush him if they did not want him as emperor. So he replaced many of the commanders with men loyal to him, and he deposed many who were loyal to Drusus and his family.³³

During the period from 29 to 30 CE, Tiberius made it clear that he regarded Sejanus as his exclusive representative in Rome. The Senate voted that his birthday be honored publicly. Public prayers and sacrifices were offered on behalf of "Tiberius and Sejanus" and oaths were sworn "by the Fortunes of Tiberius and Sejanus".³⁴ Twice previously during his reign, Tiberius had held the consulship of the Senate with his acknowledged successor: in 18 CE with Germanicus, and in 21 CE with Drusus. Now in 30 CE, Tiberius declared his intentions to make himself and Sejanus consuls the following year.³⁵ All indications were that soon Tiberius would confer the tribunician power on Sejanus, making him a *de facto* joint-emperor and successor of Tiberius after his death.³⁶

The Fall of Sejanus

Probably in early 31 CE, Tiberius received a letter from his widowed sister-in-law Antonia.³⁷ Perhaps because she had always remained above the intrigues of Roman politics, Tiberius trusted her. She told him that Sejanus was plotting a revolt and detailed many of the ways in which he was doing this. Whether or not this was the first time Tiberius suspected Sejanus

³³Frank Burr Marsh, The Reign of Tiberius, pp. 189,190.

³⁴Dio, 58,2,7ff, cited by P.L. Maier, "Sejanus, Pilate and the Date of the Crucifixion", Church History 37 (1968), p. 10.

³⁵Robin Seager, Tiberius, p. 214.

³⁶P.L. Maier, "Sejanus, Pilate and the Date of the Crucifixion", p. 11.

³⁷J. C. Tarver, Tiberius The Tyrant, p. 411.

is debatable.³⁸ However, from this time forward, he acts in such a way that makes it clear (at least to us in retrospect) that he knew of Sejanus' treason.

First, Tiberius began to send a "mixed message" about Sejanus to the Roman senators. On the one hand, he continued to lavish praise and power upon him. He referred to Sejanus as "my Sejanus". He fulfilled his promise to make Sejanus a consul of the Senate, and minted coins and erected statues in his honor. On the other hand, he began to speak in a mildly critical way of Sejanus and his allies.³⁹ He also refused to condemn Arruntus against Sejanus's wishes, and thus prevented Sejanus from gaining full control over the Senate.⁴⁰ Later that same year, Tiberius resigned his consulship, thus forcing Sejanus to do the same⁴¹. Tiberius then made Gaius consul, thus indicating that he had now chosen Gaius as his successor.⁴² He forbade all sacrifices to living humans, thus stopping public homage to Sejanus.⁴³

While Tiberius was thus keeping Sejanus off-balance, he was testing the loyalty other quarters of leadership in Rome. He ascertained that the senators strongly disliked Sejanus even though they had curried his favor. He also found that the Praetorian Guard was loyal to Sejanus only as his (Tiberius') regent.⁴⁴

³⁸ Marsh correctly says it is impossible to say at what point Tiberius began to suspect Sejanus (see Frank Burr Marsh, The Reign of Tiberius, p. 192).

³⁹ Charles Edward Smith, Tiberius and the Roman Empire, p. 144.

⁴⁰ Charles Edward Smith, Tiberius and the Roman Empire, p. 146.

⁴¹ Frank Burr Marsh, The Reign of Tiberius, p. 195.

⁴² Robin Seager, Tiberius, p. 218

⁴³ Robin Seager, Tiberius, p. 219.

⁴⁴ J. C. Tarver, Tiberius The Tyrant, p. 411.

Thus satisfied of his security, Tiberius hatched a brilliant and elaborate plot to depose Sejanus.⁴⁵ He made Macro the new commander of the Praetorian Guard. He then sent Macro to Rome with a letter to be read before the Senate. Macro intercepted Sejanus on the way and told him that the letter gave him tribunician power - virtual imperial authority. Once Sejanus went inside, Macro presented proof of his Praetorian authority over Sejanus' guards. He then sent them back to the barracks and surrounded the Senate with his own loyal soldiers. While the purposefully long, rambling letter was read, Macro went to the barracks to assure that no uprising would take place among the troops.

Tiberius' rambling letter ended with a scathing denunciation of Sejanus and demanded his arrest. Stunned, Sejanus was led out. When the senators saw that the common people and the Praetorian Guard rejoiced at Sejanus' arrest, they condemned and executed him the same day - October 18, 31 CE.

After Sejanus's Fall

Tiberius then launched an investigation into the conspiracy. All of Sejanus' family were killed, as was customary.⁴⁶ Though Tacitus describes this period as a reign of terror and a blood-bath, Seutonius and others

⁴⁵This plot is detailed in Dio, 53.8-12; Seut., Tib. 65.1; Tac., Ann. 6.48 and Josephus, Antiquities (hereafter Jos. Ant.) XVIII.6.6.

⁴⁶Robin Seager, Tiberius, p. 222.

disagree.⁴⁷ Tarver says that Tiberius moved in to check the indiscriminate persecution of Sejanus' friends.⁴⁸ Tiberius evidently made a real effort to be just in his investigation. Over the next three to four years, many people were tried. Some were convicted and executed; some were allowed to turn state's evidence; some were acquitted. All in all, several dozen people were executed.⁴⁹ Satisfied that the conspiracy had been sufficiently rooted out, Tiberius dropped the matter around 34 CE. He died shortly thereafter in 37 CE.

The Relationship Between Sejanus and Pilate

The available evidence indicates that Pilate was appointed to the office of prefect of Judea by Sejanus. This evidence consists of two bases.

The Date Pilate Was Sent to Judea

No ancient record dates the beginning of Pilate's rule in Judea exactly, nor do they specifically say that Sejanus appointed Pilate. The only chronological record of Pilate's appointment is found in Josephus who says:

"(Tiberius) sent Valerius Gratus to be procurator of Judea, and to succeed Annus Rufus. When Gratus had done those things, he went back to Rome, after he had tarried in

⁴⁷Seager believes Tacitus' report, though says it was embellished by his rhetoric (see Robin Seager, Tiberius, pp. 229-233). Smith maintains that "the number of prosecutions was not large, however, in view of the fact that the emperor apparently was convinced of the actual existence of a conspiracy" (see Charles Edward Smith, Tiberius and the Roman Empire, p. 150). Marsh agrees, saying, "The number of prosecutions is much smaller than might have been expected after what had passed, and the proceedings seem to show that a real attempt was made to secure justice; in short the whole of the Tiberian Terror is a product of imagination and rhetoric quite unsupported by evidence" (see Frank Burr Marsh, The Reign of Tiberius, p. 200).

⁴⁸J. C. Tarver, Tiberius The Tyrant, p. 413.

⁴⁹In an effort to get the whole ordeal behind him, Tiberius in 33 CE had all those still imprisoned for conspiracy executed on the same day. Twenty people were killed (see Frank Burr Marsh, The Reign of Tiberius, p. 207).

Judea *eleven* years, when Pontius Pilate became his successor...So Pilate, when he had tarried *ten* years in Judea, made haste to Rome...but before he could get to Rome, Tiberius was dead."⁵⁰ (italics mine)

Josephus infers (and the subsequent chronology demands) that Tiberius sent Gratus very soon after becoming emperor. Tiberius became emperor on September 17, 14 CE.⁵¹ Pilate was removed from office to appear immediately before Tiberius, but Tiberius died while Pilate was en route. Tiberius died on March 16, 37 CE.⁵² Therefore, Pilate was removed no later than late 36 CE.

Gratus therefore assumed his post in 15 CE at the latest. If he ruled for approximately eleven years, then he was removed in 26 or 27 CE. If Pilate ruled approximately ten years, he must have begun his rule in 26 or 27 CE. Therefore, both agree that Pilate was sent to Judea in either 26 or 27 CE.

Tiberius retired to Capri sometime in 26 CE.⁵³ The exact date is not known, but because of the above data, it is very likely that Pilate was sent

⁵⁰ Jos. Ant., XVIII, II,2; XVIII,IV,2

⁵¹ Jack Finegan, Handbook of Biblical Chronology (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964), p. 261.

⁵² Jack Finegan, Handbook of Biblical Chronology, p. 261.

⁵³ Frank Burr Marsh, The Reign of Tiberius, p. 181; Robin Seager, Tiberius, p. 200; Charles Edward Smith, Tiberius and the Roman Empire, p. 133.