

- [Home](#)
- [About](#)
- [Fiction](#)
- [Essays](#)
- [Past Issues](#)

:

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Don't Eat The Garum!

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[FICTION](#)

by Matias Travieso-Diaz

[Garum] is the overpriced guts of rotten fish! Don't you realize it burns up the stomach with its salted putrefaction?

SENECA, EP. 95.25



On his return to Rome on May 26, 17 CE, after a successful campaign against the barbarian tribes east of the Rhine, thirty-two-year-old Decimus Claudius Drusus (by then already known as “Germanicus”) was given an extravagant *triumphus*, a victory celebration the likes of which had not been seen since Julius Caesar’s return from the Gallic wars.

Germanicus' victories had erased the humiliation inflicted on the Roman Empire by its disastrous defeat, eight years earlier, in the Battle of the Teutoburg Forest. Then, three Roman legions had perished in an ambush by a confederation of Germanic tribes led by an ex-Roman official named Arminius. Germanicus had led a large Roman army across the Rhine, decisively defeated Arminius on the plains of Idistaviso by the Weser River, and gone on to defeat several local tribes in subsequent engagements.

The general, however, had returned to Rome under a cloud. He had been called away from Germania by his uncle, Emperor Tiberius, and was to become overseer of the Asia Minor provinces and client states of the Empire. This appointment served to take him away from his nucleus of power with the Roman legions in the frontier. Tiberius was mistrustful of his nephew and wanted to ensure that Germanicus would not rise against him.

Tiberius' mistrust had started when the younger man's great-uncle, Emperor Augustus, had considered selecting Germanicus as his heir but instead had chosen Tiberius to succeed him. Augustus then demanded that Tiberius adopt Germanicus as his son, a move that put the latter in the direct line of succession to rule the Empire. From that point forward, the two had a complicated relationship. Germanicus respected Tiberius but the emperor, who sought to remain in power, saw some of the actions of his nephew as efforts to undercut him. In fact, Germanicus had launched the successful attack against Arminius by crossing the Rhine with a large army without authorization from Tiberius; this disobedience had been the trigger for his recall to Rome.

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At the same time Germanicus travelled to Asia Minor, Tiberius replaced the governor of the nearby province of Syria with one Gnaeus Calpurnius Piso, a friend of the emperor who was supposed to assist the new administrator but was also Tiberius' agent. The two men developed a strong animosity from the start, with Piso refusing to enforce Germanicus' orders.

After settling matters in Asia Minor, Germanicus made an unscheduled trip to Egypt to help relieve a famine in that province, oft considered Rome's breadbasket. In doing so, Germanicus contravened a prohibition imposed by Augustus against any Roman senator visiting Egypt without leave from the emperor and the Senate. This violation enraged Tiberius as another challenge to his authority.

Germanicus returned from Egypt to find that Piso had countermanded or revoked all the orders he had left behind. He ordered Piso's recall to Rome, who left Antioch, Syria's capital, for the port city of Seleucia. However, Piso directed his wife Plancina to organize in his absence a banquet in the governor's honor as a gesture of good will. Germanicus felt duty bound to attend and accepted the invitation.

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The night before the banquet Germanicus had a nightmare. In the dream, the shade of his father Nero Claudius Drusus appeared to him in the form of a transparent ghost whose stern visage exhibited the features of the long-deceased man, as Germanicus vaguely recalled them; Drusus had died when his son was only six years old. The apparition hovered wordlessly over Germanicus' pallet, without making a sound or approaching the recumbent soldier. At last, Germanicus addressed it:

"What is your aim, *umbra*? Are you the benevolent *manes* of my father, come to bring me good tidings, or a vengeful *lemure* intent on punishing me for some transgression?"

At this challenge, the *umbra* made a low, rumbling noise that seemed to be indistinct words. Germanicus became agitated at being unable to decipher the message the specter was trying to convey and shouted: "Father, I don't understand you!"

In response, the shade uttered loudly three peremptory words:

"*Non manducare garum!*" ("Don't eat the *garum*!"). With that, the shade faded away and, in a moment or two, Germanicus fell into a deep slumber.

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The following morning, when he awoke, Germanicus was immediately presented with a clear but confusing recollection of his dream. Had he been visited by the *umbra* of his father Drusus, or had it just been a meaningless dream? The recollection of his encounter was so vivid that he had trouble dismissing it as pure reverie.

If it had *not* been a dream, was it a visitation from beyond the grave intended to impart important news or advice on him? Germanicus re-examined the

entirety of his conversation with the ghost, of which only three words remained, and those made no sense. Why would the shade of his father travel from the other world just to tell him to go easy on the condiments he used on his food? The idea of Drusus coming to play some joke on his son decades after his death was simply preposterous.

After turning these ideas over in his mind, Germanicus concluded that he had been putting on some weight after his many travels and was self-conscious about the fat that was beginning to gather around his waist. “It was not my father, but my conscience that was sending me warnings. I will have to forego desserts from now on.”

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The banquet was an elaborate feast served in the outdoors garden of Piso’s villa. There were nine attendees at the party: Germanicus, Plancina, her daughter Fulvia, two of Piso’s oldest male children, and four members of the local nobility. The men reclined on couches padded with cushions and draperies and were served food and drinks by slaves; their left hands held up their heads while the right ones picked up the morsels placed on the table, bringing them to their mouths. Plancina and Fulvia knelt on both sides of Germanicus’ couch, ready to serve him food morsels and cups of watered wine and entertain him.

One of the first dishes served at the banquet was boiled tree fungi. As the mushrooms were delivered, Plancina produced a small clay container and declared: “You must eat these fungi with *garum*. Our chef prepares his fermented fish sauce using a secret recipe that gives the sauce a delicious, unique flavor. Let me pour you some.”

Germanicus was at that moment looking at Plancina’s daughter and caught a strange expression on Fulvia’s face, who seemed to be holding her breath in anticipation of something. As Plancina poured *garum* on the mushrooms, Germanicus had a premonition and gently pushed aside Plancina’s approaching hand: “Thank you, but I am unable to eat mushrooms; they make me sick.” Plancina laid the plate aside and replied: “I am sorry. We will have to save this exquisite *garum* for the next course. I know you soldiers like to put *garum* on everything.”

The next appetizer that arrived, sea urchins with spices and honey, came with its own egg sauce, but Plancina again insisted on sprinkling *garum* on it.

Germanicus stopped her with a sudden gesture. “I am feeling a little ill. Where is the *vomitorium*?” Rising quickly to his feet, he stumbled and upset several jars, bottles and cups that were lying on the serving table next to him. Plancina rose to reset the items and, while she was doing so, Germanicus picked up the clay container, hid it in his toga, and left the villa in a rush.

Returning to his home, he gave his servant an unusual request: “Nestor, you must do this, and follow my instructions exactly. Get a large piece of fresh meat and cover it with sauce from this container, but do not use all the sauce. Save some and keep the container in a safe place. Then find Perseus, take him to your room, and feed him the meat. Close the door and stay there with the dog throughout the rest of the night. Do not go out or let Perseus eat anything else. Report to me in the morning if anything unusual occurs.”

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Perseus died a day after eating the meat soaked with garum. The animal’s sudden death could not be attributed to age or illness and proved that the garum that had been offered to Germanicus at the banquet was tainted with a poison that would have caused his death had he doused his food with it.

Germanicus denounced the murder attempt, which led to Piso’s imprisonment. Emperor Tiberius refused to hear the matter himself and referred the case to the Senate for trial. However, before the trial was over Piso died, ostensibly by suicide, though it was widely rumored that Tiberius had ordered Piso assassinated to prevent the disclosure of evidence linking the emperor to the attempt on Germanicus’ life. Tiberius sent Plancina to exile in the Balkans, where she soon passed away.

Germanicus became fearful that other agents would be dispatched to carry out the task of snuffing out his life. He wrote to Tiberius resigning from his commission on grounds of ill health: “I would like to remain in Syria until I feel better, for I fear the long sea voyage to Rome might aggravate my malady.”

Weeks later, he received a warm letter from Tiberius accepting his resignation. The emperor wished Germanicus a prompt recovery, and apparently took no further steps against him.

Germanicus spent the next two decades lying low, in self-imposed exile in Cyrrhus, a small city in northern Syria. From afar, he witnessed how Tiberius

withdrew to his palace on the island of Capri, leaving the day to day running of the empire in the hands of ambitious courtiers. Tiberius later went on a violent rampage, executing many high-born Romans that he suspected of having treasonous intentions. Germanicus may have escaped the purge thanks to his disappearance from public life and the remoteness of his exile; perhaps the emperor still harbored affection for his once beloved nephew.

In Tiberius' final years, rumors kept circulating about the emperor's debased personal life in Capri. Whether true or false, these rumors added to the general loathing felt by the populace against their ruler. When Tiberius died under mysterious circumstances in CE 37, mobs filled the streets of Roma yelling "Tiberius to the Tiber!," the Tiber River being the resting place of executed criminals.

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The welcome Germanicus received upon his return to Rome after Tiberius' death dwarfed even that afforded him all those years earlier. No formal triumph was awarded, but the Senate immediately confirmed his accession as emperor and, with a collective sigh of relief, put the empire in the capable hands of a well-loved man. Germanicus assumed power in his fifties, leading many superstitious Romans to wonder whether he had been delivered by the Fates to continue the reign of Julius Caesar, slain at fifty-five years of age.

Indeed, Germanicus proved to be a military genius. Within a year of his investment, he organized and led a massive invasion of Germania Magna, the same project he had been on the verge of carrying out when he was summoned back to Rome by Tiberius. His campaign succeeded in securing and annexing to the Empire a vast area extending to the east from the Rhine River to the Vistula, and south to the Danube.

The newly conquered area became fortified and colonized by later emperors. The barbaric tribes that inhabited Germania Magna were assimilated and blended seamlessly with the many other races that populated the Empire. Rome, as expanded by Germanicus by the addition of this large buffer region, was able to repel both Slavic and Norse incursions from outside its borders and remained the dominant power in the Western world for generations to come. Not forever, though; even Rome is not eternal.

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Bio:

Born in Cuba, Matias Travieso-Diaz migrated to the United States as a young man. He became an engineer and lawyer and practiced for nearly fifty years. After retirement, he took up creative writing. Well over one hundred of his short stories have been published or accepted for publication in paying anthologies, magazines, blogs, audio books and podcasts. A first collection of his stories, *The Satchel and Other Terrors* is available on Amazon and other book outlets.

Philosophy Note:

In this alternate history tale, Germanicus survives an attempt to murder him and becomes successor to his uncle Tiberius as Roman Emperor. Germanicus goes on to conquer Germany and brings the German tribes into the Empire, allowing Rome to withstand later incursions by nomadic invaders.