

TACITUS, AGRICOLA, 28,2: —

et uno remigante, suspectis duobus eoque interfectis, nondum vulgato
rumore ut miraculum praevehebantur.

This difficult passage has greatly exercised commentators, for 'remigante', which all the codices have, obviously will not do.

The cohort of runaway Usipi seize three galleys, forcing the 'gubernatores' to accompany them on board; one of these does something and the other two are suspected (of intending to follow the same course of action, presumably) and are killed. A number of ingenious emendations of varying degrees of palaeographical probability has been proposed (viz. remigrante Puteolanus: retro remigante Gudeman: renavigante Mützell (Halm): remeante Henrichsen: refugo, ante Urlichs: <regente> remigante<s> W. R. Paton: refugiente Andresen olim: denegante J.

Müller: *morigerante Wex*), but none seems to satisfy the reasonable requirement of explaining and justifying in a fully natural way the words 'suspectis' and 'interfectis' — especially the latter. Some stronger expression which would give point to these words is desiderated. Perhaps we should read 'et uno in oram agente (sc. navem)...' ('since one was steering his craft towards the shore...') — i. e. in order to run it aground). An object to 'agente' could easily be supplied mentally since we have 'liburnicas' in the line above.

It has been held (e. g. in the Furneaux-Anderson edition) that the phrase 'ut miraculum' and the account in the epitome of Dio (60, 20, 2) by John Xiphilinus imply that the Usipi had no pilot at the start of their voyage, and that the words 'per inscitiam regendi' in 4 below suggest that they had none at the end. The former inference is not inevitable, the latter is certainly open to doubt. The account of the enterprise in Dio-Xiphilinus proves nothing about the presence or absence of a pilot, for it makes no mention of pilots at all. The 'argumentum' in Furneaux-Anderson is 'ex silentio'. The words 'ut miraculum' doubtless refer to the surprise felt by the people on the sea-coast at the unexpected appearance of the galleys as they sailed by ('praevehebantur') and at their erratic course¹⁾ (so Furneaux-Anderson), but this erratic steering, as I hope to show in the next paragraph, does not provide positive proof that there was then no 'gubernator'.

The phrase 'per inscitiam regendi' does not necessarily preclude the survival of one pilot until right up to or just before the shipwreck. Three separate vessels sharing one pilot (and not, we may take it, a very co-operative one — cp. 'adactis per vim' above) and carrying a parcel of inexperienced (in navigating those waters) and, doubtless, highly nervous army deserters would run a very great risk of going erratically and of foundering at last. This pilot could be on board only one vessel at a time and his instructions, though guilelessly correct and audibly transmitted to the others, would surely be subject to unfortunate misinterpretation. If we imagine this situation we can see that 'per inscitiam regendi' is not inconsistent with the presence of a pilot at the end of the voyage. However, he may have been devoured²⁾ when things were desperate and the men no longer cared what they did — but this, if at all, would most likely have occurred just before the shipwreck (for hitherto their desire would presumably have been to retain their pilot, however untrustworthy he may have shown himself, for as long as possible) and this indeed may have proved the decisive factor in bringing about the shipwreck itself! The facts are not known³⁾.

1) If one ship, it may be observed, made at first for the shore (cp. my proposed emendation above) and then sheered off again out to sea, this would constitute erratic sailing and would surely be cause for wonderment amongst spectators on the shore.

2) The story of the cannibalistic actions of the Usipi is not incredible; one recalls the trial at the Devon and Cornwall Winter Assizes in 1884 of two men, Dudley and Stephens, survivors of a yacht, the 'Mignonette', wrecked in the South Atlantic, who killed and ate a dying companion, Parker, a youth of seventeen.

3) Dr. M. Duggan (Proceedings of the Classical Association, vol. L II, 1955, p. 20) defends Puteolanus' reading and accepts the view that all three were killed at the start, holding (with a suggestion in Furneaux-Anderson) that 'interfectis' applies to 'uno' as well as to 'duobus'. This seems very dubious syntax.

Perhaps Tacitus himself did not know them or, if he did, he did not apparently think a full account of them relevant. The broad, dramatic effect of this episode (see Furneaux-Anderson p. 116) is what Tacitus held to be important, and so he has related it economically, even a little obscurely, leaving out circumstantial details. There is, however, sufficient in his narrative for us to follow its drift without too much effort.

To sum up, then, I suggest that at the beginning of the voyage one of the three pilots tried, if my textual conjecture is correct, to run his galley aground (thus hoping to frustrate the venture) and that, on account of this action, his two colleagues suffered death on suspicion of the same intent. The first was spared for the good reason that the Usipi would consider one pilot at least to be necessary, but how long he remained alive cannot be exactly established.