

SUGGESTIO FALSI IN TACITUS

There are a number of passages in the second book of the *Histories* of Tacitus which, whether designedly or not, suggest what is or appears to be misleading. The present paper deals with a few difficulties of this sort which have not yet been fully discussed.

1. 11, 1 *laeta interim Othoni principia belli, motis ad imperium eius e Dalmatia Pannoniaque exercitibus. fuere quatuor legiones, e quibus bina milia praemissa; ipsae modicis interuallis sequebantur, septima a Galba conscripta, ueteranae undecima ac tertia decima et praecipui fama quartadecumani rebellione Britanniae compressa. addiderat gloriam Nero eligendo ut potissimos, unde longa illis erga Neronem fides et erecta in Othonem studia. sed quo plus uirium ac roboris, e fiducia tarditas inerat.*

The accusation of *tarditas* refers, if we are to believe some interpreters, to all four legions of Dalmatia and Pannonia, summoned by Otho to Northern Italy shortly before the First Battle of Bedriacum in A. D. 69. A little reflection will show that this is not so. One legion, XIII from Poetovio, had arrived in its entirety before the fatal day; the words *plus uirium ac roboris* evidently allude to the fighting qualities which had won *fama* and *gloria* for XIII and which had caused it to be specially selected by Nero for a purpose which Tacitus omits to state, but which we take to be his projected Eastern campaign; the commanders of the four legions of Illyricum (one, VII Galbiana, newly recruited, as we are here reminded) could not be accused by Tacitus of supposing their forces so far superior in numbers and quality to the German armies of Vitellius as to encourage complacency; and, finally, the despatch of vexillations when the main bodies were to follow close behind can only have been a response to an instant request by Otho to set every available man in motion at the earliest possible moment. The accusation of over-confidence and slowness in moving towards Bedriacum must therefore be understood to be directed against XIII alone. How far is this criticism justified by Tacitus' own narrative? From this we learn that XIII was re-

presented only by a vexillation at the First Battle of Bedriacum on 14 April, whereas the main body of XIII had arrived from Poetovio about 7 April and its vexillation had taken part in the engagement *ad Castores* two days earlier¹). By comparison, then, with XIII, XIIIII was indeed late, and this may be all that Tacitus has in mind: his unfortunate silence about the other two legions, XI and VII Galbiana, leaves us here, as elsewhere, in doubt.

But what was the reason for XIII's 'lateness', whatever precise significance we attach to the word? Was it excess of confidence — or the greater distance of its march? Again regretably, our author does not localise XIIIII's HQ, but there is a high degree of probability that this lay further from Bedriacum than does Poetovio: perhaps at Siscia or further eastward. An additional distance of only 90 mp would involve a delay of 7 days²); and if the main body of XIIIII arrived some 7 days after that of XIII, it would have found the battle fought and lost. If, on the other hand, XIIIII lay more than 90 mp further to the east, its speed of march must have been the greater in proportion. For there are clear signs that the main body of XIIIII was expected to arrive at Bedriacum very shortly after 14 April, that is, a day or so — *a modicum intervalum* — after its vexillation³). In any case, a slow response by XIIIII is most unlikely in view of its *erecta in Othonem studia* and what is called later its *praecipua . . . ferocia*.

Several interconnected factors may have been responsible for inducing Tacitus to write this unconvincing sentence: the comparison with XIII and the failure to note (and to record for us) the position of XIIIII at the start of its march; perhaps some expression of regret in his source or sources at the absence from the decisive battle of so excellent a formation by so narrow a margin; perhaps an unconscious shift from XI and VII Galbiana (if these were absent, as seems likely) to XIIIII; and a

1) For the date of the fight *ad Castores*, cf. F. Koester, *Der Marsch . . . des Fabius Valens*, Diss. Münster 1927, 18.

2) 1+ days for the courier sent by Otho, 5+ days for the legionary march. The average daily speeds supposed are: for the mounted courier 50 mp, for the legionaries 15 mp on a long march: F. Stolle, *Das Lager u. Heer der Römer*, 1912, 25—50; Sir W. M. Ramsay in *Hastings' Dictionary of the Bible*, Extra Volume, 375—402, esp. 387—8; A. M. Ramsay, *JRS* 15 (1925), 60—74; C. W. J. Eliot, *Phoenix* 9 (1955), 76—80. Distances are calculated with the help of the itineraries.

3) 32, 2; 54, 1.

delight in the antithesis *fiducia-tarditas*. In any case the unfortunate sentence was allowed to stand. Tacitus was not aware that he was misleading us, and no ulterior motive prompted the confusion of which he is guilty.

2. 18, 2 *fit temeritatis alienae comes Spurrinna, primo coactus, mox uelle simulans, quo plus auctoritatis inesset consiliis, si seditio mitesceret.* 19 *postquam in conspectu Padus et nox adpetebat, uallari castra placuit. is labor urbano militi insolitus contundit animos.*

in conspectu Padus *ML*: in conspectu hostis *Classen*: e conspectu Padus *C. Heraeus*: conspectum extra Padus *Weidner*: non iam conspectu Padus *Meiser*: in conspectu Adua *Purser*.

A curious and perplexing little episode in the Othonian defence of the line of the Po is the unwilling reconnaissance of Spurrinna, marching out one day in late March 69 from his fortified stronghold of Placentia, and marching back to it on the next: perplexing, that is, as recounted by Tacitus. The intention of the historian is clear: to stress the indiscipline of the troops in a civil war, and to record an incident in the early career of a distinguished contemporary which would show his resourcefulness and success in a difficult situation. The mysterious march concludes happily with praises for the *providentia ducis* and with the triumphant defence of Placentia.

The main difficulty is to reconcile the phrase *postquam in conspectu Padus* with the undeniable fact that Placentia itself lies a few hundred yards south of the Po, as Tacitus knows. Hence a crop of emendations, not one of which will stand up to examination. Classen's suggestion, palaeographically improbable, is scarcely compatible with 18, 1 *certum erat Spurrinnae . . . necdum uenisse Caecinam* and 19, 1 *metum ac discrimen . . . si cum exercitu Caecina patentibus campis tam paucas cohortis circumfudisset*. Heraeus apparently thinks of a crossing of the Po and a march of perhaps a mile or so on the road to Laus, a proceeding at once dangerous and pointless. Weidner offers in addition an unlikely anastrophe. Meiser's conjecture is palaeographically acceptable, but otherwise open to the same criticism as that of Heraeus. Purser's ingenious introduction of the Adua takes Spurrinna in the wrong direction, north-eastwards and at right-angles to the enemy's advance. We return therefore with such optimism as we can muster to the reading of M and L, and are not comforted by the criticism of Spurrinna

which, on a considered view, seems to be implied by the words *fit temeritatis alienae comes*: can fellow-travelling with rash mutineers, we ask, be the making of military greatness? ⁴) But first the march: supposing a morning start, we infer that nightfall would find the praetorians of Spurinna some 15—20 mp from Placentia. We require a road leading in the direction of the enemy, that is, west or north-west, and reaching or crossing the Po at the appropriate distance. The Ravenna Geographer and the Tabula Peutingeriana supply us with one, as was seen by Passerini ⁵). The road to Ticinum (which lay on Valens' approach route) branched from the Via Postumia some way west of Placentia in order to cross the Po at the station Ad Padum (identified by K. Miller with Pievevitta) and pass through Quadrata and Ad Lambrum to its goal. Between Placentia and Ad Padum, the winding Po would have been out of sight to those on the road.

We may now reconstruct the story as follows. Spurinna is faced with a demand for an advance from inexperienced praetorians whom he believes to be no match for the Vitellians in the open either in numbers or experience. His own plan is to defend Placentia, but knowing that the main force of his nearer opponent Caecina is still some way off — though raiding parties of Vitellians are already attempting to cross the Po —, Spurinna takes a calculated risk. The only way in which an individual can control a mob is to place himself at its head. Spurinna drops his protests, and like Richard II in the Peasants' Revolt, exclaims, 'I will be your leader.' Choosing the relative safety of the south bank, he marches his men briskly along the highroad westwards, turning off towards Ad Padum. When dusk falls, the river is in sight; the troops are set to entrench a camp in the usual way. A twenty-mile route march followed by some unaccustomed digging (with the thought of worse to come once the Po was crossed) is sufficient to induce a change of heart in the *urbanus miles*. On the following morning, wearier and wiser men, they are content to return to the security and comfort of Placentia. One can imagine the pleasure of

4) E. G. Hardy (ed. Plut. *Galba* and *Otho*, 1890, xcvi) speaks of the march as one entailing 'no small risk', but the phrase does not occur in his later account in *Studies on Roman History*, Second Series (1909), 178.

5) A. Passerini, 'Le due battaglie presso Betriacum' in *Studi . . . Ciaceri*, 1940, 18. A large-scale map is helpful.

Spurinna as he recalled the incident in after years in the hearing of Pliny and perhaps Tacitus⁶).

There remains the epigram, *fit temeritatis alienae comes Spurinna*. This is commonly rendered 'Spurinna associated himself, had to join in, a rash action not his own'. In such a guise, it inevitably contains a reflection upon Spurinna as a leader which is at variance with the tenor and intention of the anecdote. But *comes* here surely retains its original sense of 'one who accompanies a traveller' and this is its meaning in at least half the contexts in which Tacitus employs the word. We seem to have a concealed reference to the start of the march, and should accordingly translate 'Spurinna accompanied a march dictated by the rashness of others.' It may well be that Tacitus' desire to produce an effective mot has induced him to omit all reference to what is essential to our understanding of the passage, namely an indication of the direction taken by the marching troops.

Understood in this way, the incident heightens our admiration for Spurinna's tact and good sense. As recorded by Tacitus, it tends to mislead. How many even of the author's earliest readers can have been familiar with the exact course of the Po above Placentia and of its relationship to the Placentia-Ticinum road? Here, as so often, Tacitus becomes intelligible only to the student who has studied the maps or walked over the countryside; that done, his story makes excellent sense. Three deductions are permissible from this episode alone: Tacitus' sources are sound; he follows them faithfully, abbreviating, commenting, adding epigram and drama; and he overestimates his readers' knowledge of topography — or, unless his interest is aroused, allows us and himself to neglect it. There can be no *arrière pensée* in the narration at this point except the obvious one of paying a graceful tribute to Spurinna and of underlining once more the indiscipline of troops fighting a civil war.

3. A much more serious difficulty has been caused by the message brought to Brixellum after the First Battle of Bedriacum (14 April) and before the emperor's suicide on 16 April⁷), as recorded by Tacitus at 46, 3: *praemissi e Moesia eandem obstationem aduentant: s exercitus, legiones Aquileiam ingresses nuntiabant, ut nemo dubitet potuisse renouari bellum atrox,*

6) Pliny, *Ep.* iii, 1; cf. Syme, *Tacitus*, 634 f.

7) L. Holzapfel, *Klio* 13 (1913), 289 ff., 295 n. 3.

lugubre, incertum uictis et uictoribus. The natural and common interpretation of this is that the Moesian legions (VII Claudia, III Gallica and VIII Augusta from Viminacium, Oescus and Novae respectively) were reported by the Moesian messengers, and are believed by Tacitus, to have entered Aquileia at least three days before 15 April. This appears to stand in gross contradiction with the full account of Suetonius at *Vesp.* 6: *Moesiaci exercitus bina e tribus legionibus milia missa auxilio Othoni, postquam ingressis iter nuntiatum est uictum eum ac uim uitae suae attulisse, nihilo setius Aquileiam usque perseuerauerunt, quasi rumori minus crederent,* etc. and with the words of Plutarch, *Otho* 15 ἀπαγγέλλουσι τὴν ἐκ Μωσίας ἡμῶν δύναμιν οὐ πολλῶν ἡμερῶν ὁδὸν ἀπέχειν ἤδη καταβαίνουσαν ἐπὶ τὸν Ἄδριαν. So far then were the Moesians from entering Aquileia about or before 12 April that their vexillations had not yet reached that town on a date some three days later than 16 April. 'It is impossible', remarks Braithwaite, 'to decide whose chronology is correct' 8). The reputation of either Tacitus or Suetonius must suffer. The former, we have seen reason to believe, used good sources and is honest; the latter is undoubtedly sometimes found to be inaccurate. But on this occasion it is particularly hazardous to dismiss as an unreliable witness one who gives the more detailed account and whose father, as an officer of XIII in this campaign, had excellent reasons for being deeply interested in the arrival or non-arrival of reinforcements for Otho's army. The short allusion of Tacitus at 85, 1 to the proceedings at Aquileia confirms Suetonius' account in general.

To return to 46, 3: it seems not to have been noticed that Tacitus does not in fact say that the legions which entered Aquileia before Otho's death were Moesian: he speaks only of *legiones*, of *aduentans exercitus*. Are there not other possibilities? We have already noted the silence of Tacitus on the date of arrival of VII Galbiana and XI. It is impossible here to enter upon the vexed question of the Othonian order of battle at Bedriacum; but on grounds of distance and assuming fairly similar legionary marching speeds, it is obviously likely that the Moesians were preceded in their movement westwards to Aquileia by those legions of Illyricum which lay less remote from it, that is, by XI from Burnum (255 mp; but the country was

8) ed. Suet. *Vesp.*, p. 35; cf. similar perplexity in G. Manfrè, *La crisi politica dell'anno 68—69 d. C.*, Bologna 1947, 106 ff., 119 f.

rough and the consular legate hesitant ⁹⁾) and by VII Galbiana from Carnuntum (323 mp; but no less eager than the Moesians to defend Otho, and led by the vigorous Antonius Primus). Contrast these distances with the 493 mp which separated Aquileia and the nearest Moesian legionary HQ, that at Viminacium. It is far from proved (though sometimes asserted) that VII Galbiana and XI were already present at the battle on 14 April. On the other hand, XIII (from Poetovio, 174 mp from Aquileia) and part of XIII (whose HQ at this time was somewhere in Pannonia or Dalmatia) were certainly present. The main body of XIII arrived at Bedriacum very shortly after the battle *ad Castores*, say 7 April, and the vexillation of XIII not later than 13 April, the eve of the Battle of Bedriacum. Since Aquileia is 12 days' legionary march (178 mp) from Bedriacum, the last of these troops must have traversed Aquileia not later than 1 April. We shall not be rash in wondering whether the main body of XIII and also the two other Illyrian legions, VII Galbiana and XI, may not have followed them through the frontier town between 1 and 13 April.

Indeed, a closer calculation is possible if we assume Suetonius to be innocent until he is proved guilty. The courier bringing the news of Otho's suicide (dawn, 16 April) must have reached Aquileia by the evening of 18 April. Allow him at least another day's ride to the east before encountering the first Moesian troops, and the earliest moment at which he is likely to have met them will be 19 April, say 50 mp east of Aquileia. Hearing, and disbelieving, the news, the leading Moesian vexillation would have continued on its way, arriving at Aquileia not much earlier than 22 April. The difference between the distances from Aquileia of the HQs of VII Claudia (Viminacium) and VII Galbiana (Carnuntum) is $493 - 323 = 170$ mp, which implies a difference in the dates of arrival of 14+ days. If the vexillation from Viminacium arrived, according to our supposition, in Aquileia on 22 April, then that of VII Galbiana did so on 7 April, the main body following soon after. A cross-check can be made from the date of arrival of the main body of XIII at Bedriacum, 7 April: this implies that it reached Aquileia on 26 March. Poetovio is nearer to Aquileia than is Carnuntum by the extent of $323 - 174$ mp = 149 mp; that is, the main body of VII Galbiana should have gained Aquileia 13 days later than the main body of XIII, that is, on 8 April.

9) iii, 50, 2 *Silvanum socordem bello et dies rerum uerbis terentem*.

This is sufficiently in accord with the date of 7 April calculated above for the arrival of the vexillation of VII Galbiana. It may therefore have been quite possible for a messenger arriving at Brixellum on 15 April to say truthfully that legionary forces had entered Aquileia at the time he passed through it, on 12 or 13 April. A margin of error of up to ± 4 days does not invalidate this conclusion.

There is therefore no necessary conflict of testimony in this matter between Tacitus, Suetonius and Plutarch. The message reported at 46, 3 may very probably be strictly true. But Tacitus' use of the word *legiones*, without an adjective to disabuse his readers of their natural assumption that they were Moesian, is certainly highly misleading. Yet nothing is gained, much lost thereby; the omission is not malicious, the confusion not intended.

4. So far we have been concerned with passages in which Tacitus has misled his readers by inadvertence and the desire for brevity. We come now to a matter which, in Mommsen's phrase, Tacitus seems to have rendered *unverständlich* because it was *unverstanden*. The chronological context is that of early April, after the junction of the armies of Caecina and Valens, who are encamped on the north-eastern outskirts of Cremona.

34, 1 quieti intentique Caecina ac Valens quando hostis imprudentia rueret, quod loco sapientiae est, alienam stultitiam opperiebantur, inchoato ponte transitum Padi simulantes adversus obpositam gladiatorum manum, ac ne ipsorum miles segne otium tereret.

The bridge under construction by Caecina must be near Cremona, since it is opposite the force of Othonian gladiators described at 23, 3 as *haud procul Cremona*, whose opponents on the north bank, the Batavians, later launch a flank attack on the main Othonian forces at the First Battle of Bedriacum fought four, or fewer, miles east of Cremona. Further confirmation of its site is afforded by the fact that on the day of the battle, Caecina, receiving warning at the bridge of the approach of the enemy, rides back to his camp and finds that, though Valens, also warned, has just had time to sound the alarm and issue arms, the troops have nevertheless not yet left the camp. An interval of time of perhaps 10 or 15 minutes may be thought credible, and this would suggest two or three miles as the distance between bridge and camp. The bridge-building, and attempts by the Othonians to stop it, are mentioned more

than once in our sources as operations vigorously pursued¹⁰). It is therefore with surprise and incredulity that we read at 34, 1 that Caecina and Valens were merely pretending the passage of the river in order to pin down 2,000 gladiators on the south bank and to keep their own troops out of mischief. The elaborate engineering and defensive works involved seem quite out of proportion to the meagre objects Tacitus mentions. Some, though not all, scholars have regarded *simulantes* as evidence of a misconception on the historian's part. A decision depends on our appreciation of the general military situation in March/April, 69: and it is the absence of this appreciation in the narrative of Tacitus which has led to the erroneous constructions of Mommsen, Henderson and others.

The Othonian plan, after the failure to secure the Alpine frontier or to offer serious distraction to Valens in Liguria, is simply to hold the line of the Po and keep open a way of access to it for the forces advancing to the rescue from Pannonia, Dalmatia and Moesia. Placentia is occupied by Spurrinna, and successfully resists a siege; near Cremona lies a small force of gladiators under Macer; the bulk of Otho's army at Bedriacum (near Tornata, north of the Po) commands the Via Postumia; and the emperor himself, after a brief appearance there, posts himself at Brixellum. Inferring assistance from the Ravenna fleet¹¹), we can understand that the Othonians are well placed to defend their position. It is true that, for the moment, the invaders enjoy a numerical superiority: but how long will this superiority survive the steady reinforcement of the Othonians from the north-east? Two thousand men of XIII are present at the *Ad Castores* fight, the whole legion has arrived a day or so later. Before 14 April, the vexillation of XIII turns up: its main body cannot be far away. These facts must have been well known to the Vitellian commanders, who were ready to pounce, and made good use of the marked lack of intelligence security. They therefore had every inducement to fight soon, while the advantage in numbers still lay with them. Any attempt to circumvent the Po line by marching back to a crossing west of Placentia would have involved giving up Cremona and facing the danger of a refusal by their own troops to obey. Placentia and Brixellum were strongly held, and the

10) 34, 2—35; 41, 1; cf. 23, 2; add Plut. *Otho* 10, describing an incident omitted by Tacitus.

11) 23, 3 *nauibus*; 35, 1 *Liburnicis*; 43, 2 *nauibus*; 48, 1 *naues*.

former had resisted attack. The only method was to force a crossing near Cremona itself in the face of the weak force of gladiators, an operation for which the amphibious Batavians and the proximity and resources of the main camp and a rich town offered good prospects. If this were prosecuted with vigour, one of two things might happen: either the Othonians at Bedriacum would make no move, the bridge would be built, and the Vitellian army would advance across the Po; or the enemy, attempting to prevent this, would be lured forward to a point within comfortable range of the Vitellian camp. With luck, they might even be caught between two fires, the Vitellian camp and the bridge. To this extent, and this extent only, can Caecina and Valens be properly described as *transitum Padi simulantes*, and their aims were something more than an attack on 2,000 gladiators and a useful item in the training programme of the Vitellian army.

The effectiveness of the trap depended on the quality of the Othonian leadership. The elderly and cautious Suetonius Paulinus would not fall into it. But Suetonius is no longer in favour with Otho. Subordinate now to Titianus and Proculus, he can only protest at the decision to place the army in jeopardy by a march towards a confluence which must have been in close proximity to the Vitellian bridge-building site¹²). Titianus and Proculus are severely handled by Tacitus: *imperitia prope- rantes, illi deterioris consilii auctores, culpa, deterrimi, imperite* are some of the expressions he permits himself concerning them. Otho himself, however, who must bear the final responsibility, is treated generously. There is, indeed, an admission that his *atrocia mandata* tipped the scale in favour of action. But there is a notable silence at the point at which he might have been expected to expound his strategy — at the council of war at Bedriacum. A lengthy speech is made by Suetonius (sufficiently similar to the corresponding speech in Plutarch), and both Marius Celsus and Annius Gallus echo his opposition to an immediate advance. Now should come the arguments on the other side, the exposition of the danger of allowing the Po line to be pierced and a race to Rome begun. But all we find are the words *Otho pronus ad decertandum*. No reasons are offered,

12) At 40, 1 I read with Nipperdey *confluentis [Padi et Aduae] fluminum*, and accept Tacitus' and Plutarch's figures. A discussion of the chief textual crux of our author is impossible here.

and we are left to fall back upon an earlier psychological diagnosis: the emperor was *aeger mora et spei impatiens*.

A most interesting chapter in Plutarch (*Otho* 9) discusses the motives attributed to Otho by various critics. The several versions are not mentioned seriatim by Tacitus, though there are signs that he had them in mind, and his own psychological analysis corresponds with that attributed by Plutarch to the emperor's secretary, Secundus. The latter's evidence was no doubt a valuable quarry for historians, but the plurality of interpretations betokens perplexity. In Tacitus, the evidence for what was said at the council-of-war is one-sided: it is that of Suetonius Paulinus himself. The two passages with which we are dealing, *transitum Padi simulantes* and *Otho pronus ad decertandum* are complementary. Neither the Vitellian nor the Othonian plan was understood by Tacitus. The principal actors, Caecina, Valens and Otho, for various reasons, left no account behind: Caecina, so soon to betray Vitellius, had opportunity, but little inducement, to advertise the campaign in which he fought for him; Valens, in the eight months of turbulent life left to him, little time or reason to praise an operation in which his rival took the lead; and Otho least chance of all, in the few hours before his death, to defend himself before the bar of history. But Suetonius lived to beg Vitellius' pardon, and justify himself, as well as he could, to the Vitellians for his part in the battle, and to the Othonians for his part in the defeat. It is his account, his emphasis and his silence which show through those of Tacitus¹³).

5. 54,2 nec ultra in commune congressi sibi quisque consulere, donec missae a Fabio Valente epistulae demerent metum. et mors Othonis quo laudabilior, eo uelocius audita. 55 at Romae nihil trepidationis; Ceriales ludi ex more spectabantur. ut cessisse Othonem... certi auctores in theatrum attulerunt, Vitellio plausere.

If our last example of *suggestio falsi* may be attributed to an honest misunderstanding, Tacitus' account of the reaction of senate and people to the news of the Vitellian victory is clearly a hostile one. So far as the populace of Rome is concerned, this causes us no surprise, for he consistently denigrates the *uulgus*

13) This does not of course prevent Tacitus from voicing criticisms of Suetonius which reflect the recriminations of post-war controversy: 25, 2; 26, 2; 37, 1; 60, 1.

of the capital. But the predicament of the senate interested the senator more closely, and his innuendo is not contemptuous, but virulent.

A number of leading senators had accompanied Otho northwards to the theatre of war, perhaps as hostages for the behaviour of those left at Rome, but they had remained in the rear at Mutina, 50 mp from Bedriacum and 30 mp from Brixiellum. When vague rumours of defeat began to trickle in, their position became difficult: openly to acknowledge Vitellius was impossible in the presence of their Othonian bodyguard — and rumour might lie; but loyalty too long maintained towards Otho would ruin their hopes of pardon and favour from Vitellius. Tacitus' account stresses their inevitable prevarications, divisions, and, above all, fears. This last note is struck again and again: *discrimen, metus, trepidi... et anxii, paudentium curas, periculum, formidinem, metum* are words which occur within three chapters. And mingled with fear are two other emotions: *pudor* when news of Otho's intention to die is known; *adulatio* towards the brother of Vitellius.

Chapter 55 begins with a typically adroit transition to the situation at Rome: *at Romae nihil trepidationis; Ceriales ludi ex more spectabantur*. Tacitus rebukes at once the senators at Bononia for their fear and the populace at Rome for its unconcern. But it is when our author produces his brilliant antitheses that we must be most on our guard. The *Ceriales ludi* were celebrated from 12 to 19 April. Since the Battle of Bedriacum was fought on 14 April and Otho committed suicide at dawn on 16 April, no conceivable reproach can be levelled against those who embarked upon the annual festival in ignorance of events which had not yet occurred. Nor must we forget the time necessary for the transmission of the news to the capital. An inspection of Tacitus' own narrative at chapters 52-5 enables us to construct a time-table of events with some confidence.

News of the catastrophe on 14 April must have reached the senators at Mutina by the afternoon or evening of 15 April. A confused debate then took place, the upshot of which was a decision to retire to Bononia, 25 mp on the way to Rome. Even supposing a night start, the withdrawal must have taken most of the following day, since the bodyguard marched with them. At Bononia, desperate for authentic information, the senators went to the length of posting pickets on the various roads and tracks leading northwestwards, and managed to intercept a

freedman of Otho, who admitted under interrogation that he was carrying the farewell messages which Otho had written to his sister and to Messalina on the evening of the previous day¹⁴). The freedman had therefore covered the 55 mp at a normal speed. Another freedman on his way south, Coenus, later caused intense alarm by alleging for his own reasons¹⁵) that the main body of XIII, sorely missed in the battle, had turned up after it and converted defeat into victory. The ensuing panic of the senators was only allayed by a despatch from Fabius Valens which must have confirmed the capitulation of the Othonian armies. Since this took place on 15 April at Bedriacum (and perhaps a little later elsewhere¹⁶), and since Bononia is 75 mp from Bedriacum, the message from Valens cannot have arrived much earlier or much later than 17 April, and it was followed, probably also on 17 April, by the news of Otho's death. Meantime, official couriers, *certi auctores*, were on their way at top speed from Brixillum to Rome, 344 mp distant. The news of the First Battle of Bedriacum and of Otho's death was communicated to the people while they were sitting in the theatre, and since the last day of the *Ceriales ludi* was devoted to *ludi circenses*, the date cannot be later than the afternoon of 18 April.

Such is the bald narrative. Tacitus has improved it, cunningly and with malignity. Before we turn to the transition which provoked our curiosity, let us look at the concluding sentences of ch. 54: the epigram at the end sounds well. But what does it mean? Why should the news of a suicide travel more quickly when the act is creditable? And did the news in any case travel quickly? We have already seen that the transmission of the news to Bononia took the normal time, a day, to cover the 55 mp involved: no faster than the speed of Otho's envoy to his sister and Messalina over the same road 24 hours earlier, perhaps even a little slower. After . . . *demerent metum*, we expect in plain Latin something like *nec multo post audita Othonis mors*. But Tacitus does not write plain Latin, and we have two additions: the mysterious reference to speed; and the last hit at the ignominious behaviour of the senators, so far from praise and honour. The latter allusion we understand; the former is still unclear.

14) 53, 2 *suprema mandata* = 49, 1 *supremas curas* = Suet. *Otho* 10, 2 *binos codicillos . . . ad sororem consolatorios et ad Messalinam Neronis*.

15) 54, 1 *diplomata Othonis . . . neglegebantur*.

16) 51 *ad finem*: apparently 16 April.

The words *at Romae nihil trepidationis* mark the formal transition to Rome. But in fact the mind of Tacitus has already moved southwards to the capital in the previous sentence: for such speed as the news of Otho's death displayed was not achieved by the messenger between Brixellum and Bononia. By whom, then, if not by the relay of *certi auctores* between Brixellum and Rome, whose journey of 344 mp in three days or less represents a performance more than twice as fast as that normally attained by couriers? For this is the hypothesis we must adopt if we are to avoid implying an impossibility, namely, that it was the senators at Bononia who late on 17 April sent off a message which reached Rome on the afternoon of the following day.

It seems then that the sentence *et mors Othonis . . . audita* achieves, and conceals, the telescoping of two quite separate events: the message to Bononia at normal speed, the fast message to Rome — immeasurably more important than communication with a few senators of doubtful status and whereabouts in northern Italy¹⁷). Somebody in Otho's suite, perhaps the secretary Secundus or the praetorian prefect Plotius Firmus, realised the extreme urgency of the situation; for it was vital that the senate in Rome should be prevented from taking, in ignorance, any action tending to show further loyalty to an emperor now dead and a cause now lost. But neither the speed of the fast messenger nor that of the slow has anything to do with the nobility of Otho's death.

After recording the announcement to the people in the theatre, Tacitus turns to the session of the senate in which Vitellius was given the imperial prerogatives: *in senatu cuncta longis aliorum principatibus composita statim decernuntur*. The language of the "lex de imperio Vespasiani" supplies the commentary: *uti . . . ei . . . liceat, ita uti licuit divo Aug., Ti. Iulio*

17) That no official message of Otho's death was sent to Bononia is shown by the difficulty the senators found in getting information. The fast couriers who left Brixellum, perhaps about noon, may well have passed through Bononia, 55 mp away, late on the same day (16 April), that is, soon after the senators had reached it and before the pickets were set. But rumour was busy at posting-houses along the road, and Coenus had difficulties in getting horses: cf. n. 15. The members of Otho's suite sent off on 15 April travelled by water or *uehicula* and had naturally not arrived at Bononia on the following day; Verginius Rufus, among others, spent the night of 16 April in the town of Brixellum; 51 *domus*; Plut. *Otho* 18 τὴν οἰκίαν.

Caesari Aug., Ti. Claudio Caesari Augusto Germanico. That the accumulated prerogatives should be conferred en bloc on each new emperor is natural and inevitable, nor does such conferment upon Otho and Vespasian attract the historian's criticism¹⁸). Here the introduction of the injurious adverb *statim* produces an antithesis of questionable logic, and must be taken, in the light of the tenor of these chapters, as evidence of wilful animus.

We observe therefore in these chapters a four-fold *suggestio falsi* — that the Bononia senators were discreditably craven, that the populace of Rome celebrated the Cerialia heedless of battle and imperial suicide, that the nobility of Otho's end caused news of it to spread rapidly, and finally that the senate in Rome showed indecent haste in acknowledging their new master. Whatever the part played in this by the seductions of literary artifice or by mental confusion, the handling of these chapters betrays the historian as an advocate pleading a cause. This is no doubt honest history, but it is history written *cum ira et studio*.

6. Some twenty chapters are devoted to a description of Vitellius' progress from the Rhine to Rome. The story is told with a wealth of detail and is substantially faithful in its observance of the chronological sequence of events. The impression given of the new emperor is far from pleasing. Of the three short-lived rulers of A. D. 69, Vitellius is painted by the tradition in the least attractive colours. In Tacitus, as in Suetonius, the insistence upon his *luxuria, torpor, inscitia* and *saevitia* is only slightly relieved by the admission that he was easy-going, generous, affable, a good provincial governor, an affectionate son and father. Nor could the Flavian historians have represented him otherwise than as a bad emperor, since the dynasty claimed that it owed its rise to a spontaneous movement of popular revulsion from the excesses of Vitellius and his army. The unsuccessful and short-lived autocrat has in the nature of things few champions. While it was in nobody's interest to defend Vitellius, the gossip and perhaps the inventions of the *obtretractores*¹⁹) fill the relevant pages of Suetonius and Josephus, and are only slightly muted in Tacitus.

18) i, 47, 1; iv, 3, 3.

19) Suet. *Vit. 1* mentions *adulatores* as well. But who were they? The doctrine that the family of the Vitellii was *vetus et nobilis* scarcely presupposes adulation.

The march to Rome is punctuated by a succession of riots, shows and, above all, banquets. At times the language of Tacitus comes perilously near to the grotesque, to caricature: as, later, Vitellius is to be described as a prize rabbit in a cage, feeding continuously, so now the highways from the Tuscan and Adriatic seas are loud with the wheels of his commissariat; the states of Gaul, the municipalities and cantons of Italy are devastated by his locust-like passage; he lingers at all the pleasant towns and country mansions with an enormous retinue of actors and play-boys from the capital, *somno et luxu pudendus*²⁰). At the very end of the journey, at Saxa Rubra 7 mp north of Rome, we see him supervising — of all things — a ration-issue: 88, 1 *singulis ibi militibus paratos cibos ut gladiatoriam saginam diuidebat*. However justified the indignation of the critics of this unRoman emperor, there is too much protestation here. By repeated iteration of a few themes, the impression is conveyed of a slow and disorderly march amid excess and dissipation. A few hard facts emerge from the rhetoric, and they tell a rather different story. Vitellius left the Rhineland about 20 April, and was in Rome before 18 July. The journey of 1200 mp (if we assume what is likely, a start from Köln) therefore took him 86 days or less, an average daily speed of 14 mp or more. This in itself is not particularly slow, and the reckoning takes no account of several days spent at Lugudunum and in Northern Italy. Moreover, in the later part of his journey, his pace was that of the victorious legions who accompanied him. During the march, a number of important decisions had to be made, and these are faithfully recorded by Tacitus: the Othonian generals are treated with tact and moderation; the Othonian legions are sensibly dispersed and the Vitellians partly demobilised; in June, a judicious re-arrangement of the consular lists for the second half of the year caters for friends without making enemies. Not much more could be demanded of an emperor on the march.

The honesty of Tacitus is shown here, as it was to be in the *Annals*, by his recording obviously sensible actions performed by a ruler whom he believes to be not only worthless, but surrounded by evil and designing creatures. But in the comment or in the proportions observed we see the hand of the counsel for the prosecution. A report to Vitellius from Maure-

20) iii, 36, 1; ii, 62, 1; 71, 1; 73; 87, 1—2; 90, 1.

tania of past disorders now settled had in the nature of things to be accepted, and called for no particular action: Tacitus reflects upon the passivity and indifference of Vitellius, *impar curis grauioribus*. The emperor was not vindictive — until his brother joined him. A legion is packed off to Britain, but its departure is marked by riots and a fire. The return of other legions to their provinces invites a mention of the construction by XIII of an amphitheatre at Cremona and of shows offered there and at Bononia to the emperor, *numquam ita ad curas intento Vitellio ut uoluptatum obliuisceretur*. A striking tableau is drawn of his visit to the battlefield outside Cremona, with a hint of the nemesis awaiting him and the Cremonese: some few felt sorrow at the doubtful doom of human kind ²¹⁾ — but not Vitellius. Finally, at the point where Vitellius is to be left to continue his march, comes news of his recognition by the eastern legions: *tum ipse exercitusque, ut nullo aemulo, saeuitia, libidine, raptu in externos mores proruperant*. In such an emotional context, it is hard for the facts to speak for themselves.

In these few examples chosen from a single book, we have tried to trace the influence of style, inattention, misunderstanding and prejudice upon Tacitus' presentation of the events of history. No single factor can, by an easy generalisation, be declared predominant. In matters of factual accuracy which can be tested, Tacitus earns our esteem as an honest reporter not guilty of intentional *suppressio veri*. The other, and more dangerous, device of the advocate must often be suspected. When he permits himself the clever antithesis or telling epigram, when omissions cause reasonable perplexity, when motives are attributed and the emotional temperature rises, it is time to be asking questions. We are still very much at the mercy of Tacitus for the history of the early principate. And Tacitus is very much at the mercy of his sources and his style, of what he knows and of what he does not know.

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21) Chapter 70 has several Virgilian echoes, esp. *uaria sors rerum lacrimaeque et misericordia*.

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