

Roman Embassies and Flavian Generals: Tacitus, *Histories* 3.80-81  
Kathryn F. Williams (Canisius College)

During the empire, the Roman Senate sent embassies to welcome new emperors and on rare occasions to negotiate with foreigners (Talbert, *Senate of Imperial Rome*, 408-11). Tacitus' *Histories* 3.80-81 provides an account of a third mission for senatorial envoys – as negotiators with adversaries during civil war. In these chapters, Tacitus writes that envoys were selected to go to the two Flavian generals, Petilius Cerialis and Antonius Primus, during the last chaotic hours of Vitellius' reign. Tacitus' account of the circumstances surrounding the embassies, their composition, and their results, illustrates his use of envoys to explore the extraordinary dynamics which developed in the course of civil war and to characterize major figures.

Vitellius' northern troops shifted their allegiance to Vespasian in the second half of 69. When Vespasian's brother and prefect of the city, Flavius Sabinus, offered Vitellius the opportunity to abdicate peacefully, he initially agreed. Soon afterward, however, Sabinus had been beheaded and the Capitol set ablaze. The Roman people displayed resurgent support for their emperor by taking up whatever weapons they could find in order to face Cerialis and Primus, Vespasian's generals who were looming near the gates of Rome. Vitellius encouraged the crowd's enthusiasm, but the senate was also called and envoys selected to undertake diplomatic negotiations with the two enemy generals. Embassies were sent to both; neither proved successful. Vitellius was dead within hours.

Tacitus gives us the fullest account of these diplomatic undertakings during Vitellius' final days. Dio (64.18.3-19.1, Murison, *Rebellion and Reconstruction*, 110-18) informs us that Vitellius convened the senate and then sent senatorial envoys together with Vestal virgins. After they were unsuccessful with Cerialis and actually had their lives threatened, they continued on to the camp of Primus. Primus listened to them, but was not persuaded. Suetonius (*Vitell.* 16) simply states that Vitellius convinced the senate to send envoys along with Vestal virgins in hopes of gaining peace or the opportunity for further negotiation. Tacitus, in contrast, offers an account with two separate delegations and provides details of their composition and their experiences. The envoys sent to Cerialis' camp met with extreme danger: one of the envoys, the praetor, Arulenus Rusticus, was wounded and Cerialis' soldiers killed the lictor standing next to him. Indeed, without the general's protection (*dato a duce praesidio*), the *ciuilis rabies* would have violated the sacred right of envoys which even foreign nations respected (*sacrum etiam inter exterarum gentes legatorum ius ... usque in exitium temerasset*). Vitellius' supporters who went to Primus' camp fared somewhat better, *non quia modestior miles, sed duci plus auctoritatis*. No one was killed, even though some soldiers wanted to drive out Musonius Rufus; the Vestal virgins, who had conveyed a letter from Vitellius, *cum honore dismissae*, brought back a written response to Vitellius from Primus which declared that all negotiations were off because of the murder of Sabinus and the burning of the Capitol. Chapters 80 and 81 in several ways illustrate Tacitus' penchant for contrast in character (Morgan, *69 A.D.*, 9; Martin, *Tacitus*, 217-18; Malloch, "End of the Rhine Mutiny" 208-210). The different responses the two embassies received in the camps color the reader's perception of Cerialis and Primus and in the case of Primus add support to the claims by Morgan (3-10) and Ash (*Ordering Anarchy*, 164) that the inconsistencies in his characterization within the *Histories* reflect themes important to Tacitus' work, rather than merely a shift in sources.

There are other significant aspects of Tacitus' account, most notably the makeup of the delegations. Particularly revealing is Tacitus' presentation of Musonius Rufus as an equestrian and philosopher who apparently felt compelled *miscere se legatis* (Damon, *Book I*, 164). Elsewhere (*Hist.* 4.10.1) Tacitus informs us that Rufus was a senator, but here the historian suggests that he was something of an "interloper" in the delegation (cf. Wellesley, *Book III*, 182). This paper investigates the implications of this presentation as well as Tacitus' detailed account of Vitellius' use of Vestal virgins (Dio 51.19.2; Saquete, *Las Virgenes Vestales*, 106; Takács *Vestal Virgins, passim*; Wildfang, *Rome's Vestal Virgins*, 104). Comparison with the accounts of Dio and Suetonius makes clear Tacitus' major interest in the nature of civil war and its effects upon emperors, senators, citizens, soldiers, and generals.