

Rebellious Legions and Senatorial Delegations: Tacitus' *Histories* 1.19 and 1.74

Reports of the revolt of the Fourth and Twenty-Second Legions in Upper Germany during the first days of 69 prompted the Roman Senate to vote to send out a delegation. Tacitus discusses the make-up of this delegation in *Histories* 1.19.2. Members of the senate obviously were to participate, but there was also discussion *secreto* (Heubner 57; Sage *ANRW* II.33.2 899) as to whether Piso, newly adopted by Galba, should go “in order to add the prestige of a Caesar to the senate’s authority” (*illi auctoritatem senatus, hic dignationem Caesaris laturus*). The senate further resolved (*placebat*) to send Laco, the praetorian prefect, with the *legati*. Laco, however, refused (*is consilio intercessit*). At the end of Tacitus’ account we learn that the senate left the selection of the actual members of the delegation to Galba. The emperor consequently exposed the political nature of the delegation and the power struggles among the Romans by incompetently naming and then revising his list of envoys as they either begged to go or to stay in Rome, *ut quemque metus uel spes impulerat*. Otho recalled this delegation (1.74.2) after Galba’s murder and his own accession to power, only to send out another *specie senatus* (cf. Talbert 1984, 410), after adding praetorian guards *per simulationem officii*. In addition to being sent to the two legions in Upper Germany, Otho sent the delegation to the Italic Legion and an urban cohort stationed in Lugdunum. According to Tacitus, the praetorians were sent back without being granted the opportunity to “mix” (Damon 164) with the legions, although the senatorial envoys got to Vitellius and stayed with him longer than was justifiable (Chilver 137). With the returning praetorians, Fabius Valens (“probably legionary legate” [Morgan 69 *A.D.* 54] in Lower Germany, who was moving his troops south) sent letters to the praetorian and urban cohorts *nomine Germanici exercitus*, which rebuked them for supporting Otho over Vitellius, but also offered *concordiam*. The confusion with which Tacitus has enshrouded these diplomatic undertakings reflects in part the chaos (Miller *G&R* 24 [1977] 14) that prevailed among Romans and the Roman army in January 69. Between the time of Tacitus’ introduction of the first delegation and his account of the second, Galba has been murdered, as has his adopted successor, Piso; Otho has been recognized as emperor by the senate, although Valens and some of the legions have saluted Vitellius as emperor.

Tacitus mentions a delegation sent by the current emperor to rebellious Roman legions for each of the three emperors overthrown in 69: Galba and Otho send delegations to the Vitellian legions; later in the *Histories*, Vitellius sends a delegation to the Flavian legions. Only Tacitus mentions Galba’s delegation. Tacitus and Suetonius (*Otho* 8) note the second delegation; Tacitus (*Hist.* 3.80-81), Suetonius (*Vitell.* 16), and Dio (64.18.3) discuss the last delegation before Vespasian finally secured power. These three delegations provide structure to the turbulent events of 69, but the manner in which they are described also invites exploration of issues and individuals of far broader import than the immediate diplomatic endeavors. This paper first investigates the composition of the delegations of Galba and Otho (Chilver 136; Heubner 156; *Hist.* 4.6-8; Pigoñ *CQ* 42.1 [1992] 236) and the nature of their assignments (cf. Damon 250; Talbert 410; Chilver 137), before turning to an analysis of Tacitus’ use of these diplomatic efforts to highlight current Roman political and military behavior and power. Damon (250) notes that “T. doesn’t specify the mission of either deputation (neither accomplished anything) but rather the self-interested behaviour of the senators involved.” I modify this claim by arguing first that Tacitus provides some clues regarding the purpose of these embassies, and secondly that the characterizations developed are not limited to senators. From Tacitus’ accounts of these two embassies we learn that the senate was still involved in diplomatic procedures and was attempting to quell conflict within the city even though the senatorial delegation ultimately supported Vitellius. We also learn that Galba had become a totally ineffective emperor, Piso was a mere pawn from every perspective, Otho jockeyed for power through pretense, the praetorians’ power was limited, and Romans conducted diplomacy in various ways in 69.

Gillett (*Envoys and Political Communication* 2; cf. Millar *Emperor in the Roman World* 364) has argued that delegations were far more common than appear in ancient histories, and consequently modern commentators mislead by characterizing specific embassies as extraordinary. Although delegations may have been frequent and ordinary, Tacitus recounts them here in a manner that urges us to scrutinize extraordinary men and events in a rebellious time.