

A flagitium incognitum and its Causes in *Histories* 4

This paper explores the internal narrative causes of perhaps the most egregious transgression of normative Roman behavior in Tacitus' *Histories*, a text otherwise replete with such horrors. In the thick of what we call the "Batavian Revolt," several legions of Roman citizens in Lower Germany, under the command of Flavian partisans Hordeonius Flaccus and Dillius Vocula, renounce their Roman affiliations and swear an oath of loyalty to their ostensible foes, the freshly devised "empire of the Gauls" (*imperium Galliarum*). I argue that this disintegration of Rome's appeal stems from a failure among the Flavian leadership to comprehend the importance of repaying the soldiers' pledges of allegiance (*sacramenta*) with personal monetary gifts (*donativa*). This mutually beneficial arrangement is, as I show, central to the (dys)function and *realpolitik* of Tacitus' military landscape.

Recent examinations of the Batavian Revolt and its leader Julius Civilis (e.g., Adler (2011), Haynes (2013) and Lavan (2013)) have offered valuable new perspectives on the complexities of "Roman"- "barbarian" relations in the *Histories*. Most recently, Master (2016) has shown that Vocula's plea to his legions to stay loyal to Rome rests on "an obsolete worldview", namely that there exists in 70 CE an impermeable distinction between the Roman and Other. While I largely concur with Master's conclusions, my inquiry takes a different approach, exploring why these particular citizen-soldiers pick this precise moment to abandon Roman standards altogether—a transgressive act which Tacitus calls an "unprecedented disgrace" (*flagitium incognitum*, 4.57.3). Up until this point in the *Histories*, every legionary defection from one emperor or general to another has operated, nominally at least, under Roman jurisdiction. How could Vocula as representative of the Flavians, the Roman empire's newest stewards, fail so spectacularly to maintain its conceptual appeal?

The answer, I argue, lies in the mishandling of the oaths and donatives exchanged. When Hordeonius Flaccus, legionary legate in Upper Germany and Flavian partisan, “compels” (*adigente*, 4.31.2) his Vitellius-leaning men to swear allegiance to Vespasian, they swear the oath only grudgingly. Though now deceased, Vitellius is still the emperor of their hearts, and it will require at least one well-executed Flavian bribe to put Vitellius’ ghost to rest. Since the Julio-Claudian era (if not earlier), it had been customary for emperors and/or their agents to offer lump-sum “bonuses” (*donativa*) in implicit direct payment for the soldiers’ pledges (*sacramenta*) to serve the new imperial personality. There is considerable evidence in *Annals* 1 that Tiberius’ initial success rests heavily on such a transaction. Even Julius Civilis’ appeal depends on it. The entire conflict of 69 CE, as Tacitus chooses to frame it, hinges on Galba’s brazen refusal to pay the donative promised in his name (*neque dari donativom sub nomine Galbae promissum*, 1.5.1).

Given this broader cultural context, Flaccus’ subsequent blunder sets the table for the legionaries’ defection to the Gauls later in *Histories* 4. Soon after their grudging Flavian oath, the German legions discover that Vitellius had earlier sent funds to cover a donative, and upon learning this demand immediate payment. Flaccus pays up, but in so doing makes a costly error: “he gave [the donative] in Vespasian’s name, and this in particular was what incubated a mutiny” (*nomine Vespasiani dedit, idque praecipuum fuit seditionis alimentum*, 4.36.2). It is no wonder, then, that when the *imperium Galliarum* is willing to purchase (*emebantur*, 4.57.3) the legions’ oaths, the latter abandon Rome altogether. Vocula, in an attempt to prevent defection, argues that the individual identity of the benefactor does not matter; what matters is that he is a *Roman* rather than Gallic emperor. If Vocula were correct, then surely, Tacitus implies, there would have been no attempt to conceal Vitellius as the money’s original source (4.36.2). Thus, the Flavian position is hypocritical and untenable.

This sequence of blunders demonstrates that the appeal of Roman identity *per se* is not disintegrating. Rather the nature of its appeal has radically changed by the end of the “Year of Four Emperors”. Tacitus suggests that whoever plays the cynical game of bribery most successfully—“Roman” *or* “barbarian”—will secure ultimate power in the new post-Julio-Claudian world. When the extant *Histories* ends, it is not yet clear whether the Flavians all have the willingness or ability to succeed.

Bibliography

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