

A failed experiment: Tacitus' Galba on the principle of adoptive succession

As Tacitus tells us in *Historiae* 1, early in 69 Galba was facing several potential (or real) threats to his rule, in no small part because of his age. In order to stabilize the situation, he decided to adopt a young man named Piso Licinianus as his successor and thus initiate an adoptive monarchy for the empire. Tacitus takes this opportunity to discuss issue of the imperial succession by constructing the only speech of Galba which receives more than a brief mention in the *Historiae* (1.15-16), a lengthy talk with Piso behind closed doors instead of the more proper public speech (Levene 215-26). In this speech Galba discusses both why he has chosen Piso as his successor and why he is using adoption instead of instituting a new dynasty. Piso, however, turns out to be a bad choice—he is a man of good character with no real political or military experience—and Galba's experiment fails.

In composing Galba's speech, Tacitus sets up a series of contrasts and parallels. The two halves—the first outlining Galba's need to adopt a successor and his choice of Piso, the second explaining his decision to return to the adoptive principle—are balanced at first by a series of formal parallels; these parallels are then followed by thematic contrasts between the halves. Tacitus can thus contrast the dangers of a hereditary principate with the advantages of an adoptive one. He also evokes two series of historical parallels, the first between Augustus and Galba, the second between Galba and Nerva.

As Galba points out, Augustus' desire to keep the imperial power in his family (designating Marcellus, Agrippa, his grandsons, and finally Tiberius as his heir), through a privileging of kinship or marriage connections over merit, led to a series of bad emperors which culminated in Nero, and then a return of civil war. Galba has decided, therefore, to look for an heir outside his own family, and to choose a successor based on merit. He tries simultaneously to

position himself in the tradition of Augustus and to distance himself from Augustus' failure—but he chooses someone too similar to the young Marcellus (cf. Syme 1939, 341).

Comparison of this speech with Pliny's *Panegyricus* points up the parallels between the situations faced by Galba and Nerva, as well as the contrasts between their choices. Both were older men who had come to power after the fall of a dynasty and then decided to institute an adoptive monarchy. Galba, considering only character (Damon 2003, 136-37), selected the inexperienced Piso and made him his successor in a private ceremony, and the announcement of his choice was marked by the displeasure of the gods. Nerva, on the other hand, looked to experience, as he needed someone who could control both the Praetorian Guard and the restless frontier legions (Syme 1958, 1.10-13 and 1.208), and he chose the far more experienced Trajan and adopted him publicly.

As constructed by Tacitus, Galba's speech marks him as an intermediate figure between Augustus and Nerva. Like Augustus, he decides to designate a successor through adoption, and in an attempt to avoid the excesses of the Julio-Claudians he looks outside his own family—*his* mistake lies in choosing the upright but utterly inexperienced Piso. Facing another succession crisis, Nerva returns to the idea of adoption, but he chooses Trajan, ushering in a line of good emperors. Despite his good intentions, Galba's lack of insight leads to failure, but it is an awareness of that failure that eventually allows Nerva to succeed.

Bibliography

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