

The Year of the Four Emperors. Axiological Confusion in Tacitus' *Histories*

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Recibido: 08/10/2019 - Aceptado: 23/09/2019
DOI <https://doi.org/10.20318/fons.2020.5057>

Abstract

This paper deals with axiological confusion as seen in Tacitus' *Histories*. Through the analysis of different cases in the historical narrative, it demonstrates Tacitus' explanation of how emperors, generals or soldiers were brought to a state in which they were no longer able to discern what was good or bad for them. Tacitus saw fear and the uncertainty characteristic of the civil wars of AD 69 as originating a particular spiral of disloyalty and betrayal which accounted for the confusion in the agents' moral judgement. By interspersing his narrative with outstanding examples of the virtues that counteracted the vices responsible for impairing correct moral reasoning, Tacitus showed models of conduct who managed to overcome the confusion and worked both for their own good and that of Rome.

Keywords: Tacitus, *Histories*, civil wars, fear, betrayal, *fides*, *constantia*

Resumen

Este trabajo trata sobre la confusión axiológica en las *Historias* de Tácito. A través del análisis de diferentes casos de la narrativa histórica, se busca demostrar cómo el historiador explica la manera en que emperadores, generales o soldados se encontraron en situaciones donde no fueron capaces de discernir lo que era bueno o malo para ellos. Para Tácito habría sido el miedo y la incertidumbre propios de las guerras civiles del año 69 d.C. lo que había originado una espiral específica de deslealtad y de traición que explicaría la confusión en el juicio moral de los agentes. Al intercalar ejemplos excepcionales de las virtudes que contrarrestan los vicios que alteran un razonamiento moral adecuado, Tácito prueba la presencia de modelos de conducta que consiguieron vencer la confusión y trabajar para su propio bien y el de Roma.

Palabras clave: Tácito, *Historias*, guerras civiles, miedo, traición, *fides*, *constantia*

Introduction

In the year 44 BC Cicero wrote his *De Officiis* in the form of a letter to his son - though also intended for a wider audience - consisting of a treatise on the topic of the moral duties that a good Roman should observe in order to live in the best way. The influence of the Stoic philosopher Panaetius is particularly obvious and important in the first and second books (cf. Cic. *Off.* I 6-7), while the third shows more strongly

the independence of Cicero's own moral thinking¹. In any case, Cicero's lessons on morality perfectly blend the traditional Roman code of conduct with Stoic ethical principles². As such, the work presents an idealized picture of how to behave, and the examples are clear-cut, with little room for confusion or moral ambiguity (cf. Cic. *Off.* I 4).

In the third book, Cicero discusses specifically the conflict between what is right (*honestum*) and what is expedient or beneficial (*utile*), and argues that one must try to maintain a difficult balance between moral principles on the one hand, and doing everything in one's power to serve oneself, one's own cause or the community on the other. Cicero maintains that the sometimes opposing categories of honest actions on the one hand, and beneficial actions on the other, are in some sense identical: «but for all cases we have one rule, with which I desire you to be perfectly familiar: that which seems expedient must not be morally wrong; or, if it is morally wrong, it must not seem expedient»³. He expands on this, explaining how to make a choice when conflicting values each present themselves as the highest good, and shows how it is only an apparent conflict, as nothing will be truly expedient that is not at the same time morally right, and vice versa.

Several years after *De Officiis*, the Roman historian Tacitus follows a different path from Cicero. Rather than theorizing about how the right action is to be chosen, he examines the historical period that he is writing about and narrates situations where men have been placed in difficult circumstances and have had to make important moral choices. Through the narration of historical events, the historian's goal is not only to illustrate how things happened, but also to explain *why* they happened. Like other Roman historians, Tacitus aims particularly at explaining, interpreting and understanding the past; he seeks to provide the reader with an account not only of the processes of how the decisions were taken, but also of their contexts and, more significantly, the emotional state of the people involved in taking those decisions. The historical narrative appears to be a particularly apt means to illustrate how axiological confusion happens in the real world.

In his *Histories*⁴, for example, Tacitus depicts several cases where, for different reasons, people were not able to discern properly what was good or bad for them, and

¹ For *De Officiis*, see for example, GRIFFIN-ATKINS (1991), DYCK (1996) and more recently NEWTON (2016).

² For an account of the Stoic philosophical principles on this topic, see for example, M. Boeri, R. Brouwer, C. Veillard and G. Zago in this volume.

³ Cic. *Off.* III 81: *Sed omnium una regula est, quam tibi cupio esse notissimam: aut illud, quod utile videtur, turpe ne sit, aut si turpe est, ne videatur esse utile.* For a more detailed analysis of this particular passage, see REMER (2009), 1-29. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are taken from the Loeb editions with some modifications.

⁴ The *Histories* of Tacitus is his first major historical narrative - the other one is the *Annals* - written after the three works that are commonly known as *opera minora*: *Agricola*, *Germania* and the *Dialogus de Oratoribus*. The *Histories* start narrating the events from 1st January AD 69 and is believed to have continued up to the death of Domitian in AD 96. Only Books I to IV survive in complete form, and part of Book V.

chose to do wrong thinking that it was right. Axiological confusion is shown especially clearly in the *Histories* because its action takes place during a «period rich in disasters, terrible with battles, torn by civil struggles, horrible even in peace»⁵. For the historian, it is a time of perplexity, misunderstanding and chaos in general, which produced such a confused state of affairs as to result in the cognitive impairment of the agents, preventing them from thinking clearly when deciding on a course of action. Among the evils of the age, Tacitus saw something particularly wrong about civil war; it appeared to involve a certain corruption from its origin, that added disorientation and bewilderment to the already bleak situation: «slaves were corrupted against their masters, freedmen against their patrons; and those who had no enemy were crushed by their friends»⁶.

One of the main goals of this paper is to show how axiological confusion worked in practice with emperors, soldiers, or people in general, through the historical narrative of one of the acutest Roman historians. The specific period that the first books of the *Histories* narrate, the civil wars of AD 69, provide a particularly rich and contrasting setting for this confusion. Even though Rome had undergone other serious crises in her political history, what seemed novel in the crisis that arose after Nero's death was the coming together of so many negative factors: weak and inept emperors ruled, bad and self-centred generals had to control undisciplined and rebellious armies, foreign wars had to be fought in remote parts of the Empire, feeble and inactive magistrates and senators had to govern over the different factions that divided the city. Tacitus seems particularly keen to highlight the generalized state of confusion and distrust at all levels of society, the widespread weakness in people that brought out the worst in them⁷.

In what follows, I will deal, in the first place, with the characteristics or conditions present in Tacitus' narrative that caused confusion in the moral judgement of the actors, seen specifically in Galba's betrayal and assassination. Secondly, I will look at how Tacitus considers the successive treasons of different commanders under the emperor Vitellius. In the final part of the paper, I suggest that, besides depicting axiological confusion abundantly in the *Histories*, Tacitus also presents significant examples of the qualities that could counteract the fear and mistrust which seemed to overwhelm Romans at that time.

I

According to Tacitus, the chaotic situation at Rome during what has been called 'the year of the four emperors'⁸ appeared to have been seriously aggravated by the

⁵ Tac. *Hist.* I 2: *opimum casibus, atrox proeliis, discors seditionibus, ipsa etiam pace saevum.*

⁶ Tac. *Hist.* I 2: *corrupti in dominos servi, in patronos liberti; et quibus deerat inimicus per amicos oppressi.*

⁷ See, for example, Tac. *Hist.* I 88.

⁸ Cf. GREENHALGH (1975); WELLESLEY (1975); MORGAN (2006); COSME (2012).

omnipresence of fear. In itself, this does not seem particularly novel. As David Levene puts it, «[f]or the Roman historians, no passion is more prominent than fear. Fear for them is perhaps the single most important influence on the behavior of individuals and states»⁹. Tacitus seems, therefore, to be following a certain tradition, and in the *Histories*, fear (*metus*) appears mainly as the negative emotion in response to danger or threat¹⁰. What is not depicted is the kind of healthy fear that helps one survive, for example, or that prevents rash actions. The fear that Tacitus talks about in the *Histories* is usually an extreme, even paralysing, fear; the kind that darkens judgement¹¹. There is fear in the people and in the armies; the senators, the generals and even the emperors themselves are said to have felt fear, so the historian expands the vocabulary to suit his purposes from *metus* to *formido*, to *pavor* and *terror*¹².

Although some of the manifestations of fear are physiological, Tacitus is more concerned with showing how it can activate particular behaviors or even cloud the reasoning of the intellect, and he presents it as working in several ways. In the first place, fear seems to have been an important feature during the Principate, especially because of its connection with *adulatio* (submissive flattery). This became almost a standard characteristic of politicians, whose fear of the powerful led them to unrestrained flattery (as Tacitus himself often says in this work)¹³. Furthermore, fear, expressed through adulation, was also particularly significant because of its profound relationship with *servitus* (servitude), as fear could - and did - take away the freedom to act honorably¹⁴. *Servitus* out of fear added to the lack of *libertas*, characteristic of the rule of the emperors (cf. Tac. *Agr.* 3, 1), resulting in a «passionate love for servitude», as Tacitus notes¹⁵.

But above all, fear became a serious political feature which not only transformed Romans' relationships with one another, but also conditioned the development of events in the political, military and social spheres. Fear in Tacitus' *Histories* became a means - and an important one - of interaction between the emperor and his people, the generals and their armies, the leaders and the mob. Extreme fear resulted in complicated actions that destabilized the dynamics of the Roman political system. In

⁹ LEVENE (1997), 128.

¹⁰ Though in itself it need not be seen as necessarily a bad one, cf. Arist. *EN* III 7, 1115b 17-29 and also Sall. *Jug.* 41-42 with the idea of fear of the enemy (*metus hostilis*).

¹¹ For the topic of fear in the works of Tacitus, see, for example: HEINZ (1975); CARDAUNS (1981); MASTELLONE IOVANE (1989); CONDE (1991); MORGAN (1994b); LEVENE (1997); ZUCCARELLI (1999). For fear in ancient historiography in general, see for example, KNEPPE (1994); MARINCOLA (2003) and KAPUST (2008).

¹² It is remarkable to see how many times Tacitus uses fear-related words. In Book I alone, there are 22 instances of words related with *metus*; 11 with *formido*; 10 with *pavor*; 9 with *terror*; 9 with *trepido* and 4 with *timor*.

¹³ See, for example, at the beginning of the *Histories* I 1, where Tacitus talks about historians during the Principate who disregarded the truth «because of their passionate desire to flatter» (*libidine adsentandi*). See also I 32: «they acted according the traditional custom of flattering the emperor» (*tradito more quemcumque principem adulandi*); or I 47; I 74; I 90. Cf. KAPUST (2009).

¹⁴ For flattery, see KAPUST (2018).

¹⁵ Tac. *Hist.* I 90: *libidine servitii*. A similar claim appears in *Ann.* I 1; III 65.

Tacitus' account, fear is seen not only as deterring people from a particular course of action, but also as triggering and motivating ignoble actions - fear as cause; and there were certain occasions when fear was even the outcome of some reactions and events, decisions or behaviors - fear as result¹⁶.

It is in this *metus* in the context of civil wars that Tacitus locates the height of the axiological confusion which emperors, soldiers and the people experienced, and which, in a kind of spiral, escalated to unprecedented levels. However, that was not all. For him, this fear or *metus* felt by the characters in the *Histories*, that was intimately related to adulation and servility towards the powerful, was also capable of corrupting the most basic trait of human relationships: loyalty. It turned enmities and friendships upside down.

The virtue of loyalty (*fides*) appears particularly tricky to follow and trace in times of civil wars. According to Tacitus, to fear, adulation and servitude, were necessarily added suspicion, mistrust and betrayal. Disloyalty, therefore, is a paramount element that becomes entangled in the vicious spiral of fear. The soldiers, the people, even important generals change sides according to the emotions of the day. Through his narrative, Tacitus shows how, most of the time, *fides* becomes meaningless when allegiances shift so quickly: if one had betrayed Galba, was it more honourable to be loyal to an Otho or a Vitellius? Was it honourable or even expedient for Vespasian to encourage Othonians or Vitellians to transfer their *fides* to his own cause? Expediency mingles with fear and the result is betrayal. In Tacitus' *Histories*, *metus* corrupts *fides* among Romans - especially in commanders and the army - in a crescendo which almost necessarily ends in the axiological confusion of individuals.

Right at the beginning of the *Histories*, while Tacitus announces the subject-matter of his work, he also prepares the reader to encounter terrible things¹⁷. He presents the panorama of a «world that has been shaken to its foundations»¹⁸, and the description of the general political chaos goes on with extraordinary precision, until the people fell prey to such confusion that things that were traditionally seen as good started to be perceived as threats or even as decidedly evil: «high birth, wealth, the refusal or the acceptance of office, all gave ground for accusations, and virtues caused the surest ruin»¹⁹. By saying that virtues - the customary means to achieve glory and honour by Roman standards - caused destruction and annihilation, Tacitus declares that something was radically wrong. The violence of the struggle and fierce

¹⁶ Some of these ideas have been explored in BALMACEIDA (2017), 182-183, but from a different angle.

¹⁷ Tac. *Hist.* I 2: *Opus adgregior opimum casibus, atrox proeliis, discors seditionibus, ipsa etiam pace saevum. Quattuor principes ferro interempti: trina bella civilia, plura externa ac plerumque permixta.* See DAMON (2003), *comm ad loc.*, who suggests that Tacitus omits the positive and exaggerates the negative. For disaster narrative in Tacitus, see KEITEL (2010).

¹⁸ Tac. *Hist.* I 16: *in hoc concussi orbis motu.*

¹⁹ Tac. *Hist.* I 2: *nobilitas, opes, omissi gestique honores pro crimine et ob virtutes certissimum exitium.*

competition of the would-be emperors and their undisciplined supporting armies would not end till they reached exhaustion and self-annihilation.

The case of the emperor Galba (3 BC - AD 69), for example, who succeeds Nero in AD 68, clearly illustrates how some good qualities under the rule of fear are a mark for destruction. Servius Sulpicius Galba was probably the most illustrious Roman with regard to the nobility of his family, wealth and his achievements²⁰. In Tacitus' account, Galba's display of amiability (*facilitas*) towards his friends (cf. Tac. *Hist.* I 12); his moderation (*moderatio*) when governing Africa (cf. Tac. *Hist.* I 49), and uprightness (*iustitia*) as a proconsul of Hither Spain (cf. Tac. *Hist.* I 49), seemed to qualify him - at least at first sight - to become *princeps*. Besides, according to Tacitus, even in moments of great stress - such as the (mistaken) announcement of Otho's death - Galba demonstrated strength and equanimity: «he showed a remarkable spirit in checking licence on the part of the soldiers; before threats he was unterrified, and incorruptible against flattery» (*insigni animo ad coercendam militarem licentiam, minantibus intrepidus, adversus blandientis incorruptus*, Tac. *Hist.* I 35).

But, as Tacitus will show, all of these virtues did not seem to count for much, and they could not prevent Galba's fall. On the contrary, the emperor's *severitas* (severity) and *vetera disciplina* (old-fashioned rigor)²¹ proved dangerous to his and Rome's safety because, as Tacitus indicates, the Romans could not endure them anymore²². For Tacitus, Galba, in fact, proved inadequate²³: he exercised no prudence in the practice of traits which could have been good qualities, but which failed to adjust to the times. His lack of *moderatio* in the application of *disciplina* became something very near to cruelty, and his proverbial *avaritia* in not giving the customary donative to the soldiers certainly helped to ruin his reputation; to which problems were added that he was weak and old (*invalidum senem*)²⁴. Furthermore, Tacitus adds that on certain occasions Galba had also shown a disgraceful lack of firmness (*foeda inconstantia*)²⁵, and weakness of character (*mobilitate ingenii*), which resulted in great harm for Rome and the emperor himself: the rise of powerful freedmen, the greed of slaves, discreditable nominations for office, and a city for sale (cf. Tac. *Hist.* I 7).

Galba's failures to adapt to the mood of the times, especially his strictness and stinginess²⁶, were also combined with the growing discontent of the urban troops, and the fear provoked by his bloody march and entry into the city of Rome, accompanied

²⁰ The other sources coincide in this with Tacitus, cf. Suet. *Galb.* 2-8; Plut. *Galb.* 3; 29; and D.C. LXIII 23. See also WELLESLEY (1975), 1-33; SOCHAT (1981a); SYME (1982); MURISON (1993), 31.

²¹ For references to Galba's stinginess and severity see, for example, Plut. *Galb.* 3; 15; 18; 22; Suet. *Galb.* 6; 12; 14; 17; D.C. LXIV 2-3.

²² Cf. Tac. *Hist.* I 5. See also at Tac. *Hist.* I 18: *nocuit antiquus rigor et nimia severitas, cui iam pares non sumus*.

²³ His obituary in I 49 makes this evident: *ipsi medium ingenium, magis extra vitia quam cum virtutibus [...] maior privato visus dum privatus fuit, et omnium consensu capax imperii nisi imperasset*.

²⁴ Tac. *Hist.* I 6. For other references to Galba's old age, see I 5; I 7; I 12; I 49.

²⁵ Cf. Tac. *Hist.* I 19, when appointing ambassadors.

²⁶ See note 21 above.

by arbitrary executions, and the massacre of unarmed soldiers²⁷. According to Tacitus, this created the perfect mix to provoke sedition and revolt: fear degenerated into hatred that, with the proper encouragement, moved the praetorians to acclaim Otho as emperor and support him in his plan to get rid of Galba²⁸. To these circumstances must be added Otho's fierce resentment, for Galba had not adopted him but preferred Piso as heir to the throne; and the unrest of the city soldiers, who had not received their promised donative and were apprehensive about their worsening conditions of service²⁹.

It is difficult to explain what follows next because the situation became more and more confused until the actors seemed out of control, losing the ability to judge whether what they were doing was right or wrong. Tacitus' very detailed description lasts for several chapters³⁰. Disloyalty spread like a contagion among the legions (*infecit ea tabes legionum*), who were both terrified of death and at the same time bold enough to dare the foulest of crimes: killing their emperor (cf. Tac. *Hist.* I 26-28). It was fear together with greed that made the soldiers act in this way: the sight of an old emperor allowing his subordinates to practice indiscriminate cruel behavior, and his refusal to pay them their customary donative, made them fear for their own future. Fear worked as the *causa* of their forgetting their duty and loyalty: they rebelled. But the result of the action caused by fear was also fear: fear as *finis*. The soldiers' sedition, the fact that some had acclaimed a new emperor when the old one was still alive, made them even more afraid of the consequences of their actions³¹. They did not know what the best course was now: they had betrayed their loyalty to Galba by breaking their *sacramentum*³², some placing themselves on the side of the traitor in the city, Otho, and some acclaiming a new head abroad, Vitellius³³. According to Tacitus, city soldiers and legionaries, supporters and contestants were left at the mercy of whatever may occur by chance and without any warning, and therefore rash judgements and frenzied actions were highly likely (cf. Tac. *Hist.* I 31).

There was a state of uncertainty in the city, «Rome was in a state of excitement and horror-stricken»³⁴, which was increased by rumors coming from different places. Tacitus explains how in civil wars, different groups on the same side often fight for

²⁷ Marines enrolled by Nero who met Galba with demands as he entered Rome. For the massacre of unarmed soldiers in Galba's march towards Rome, see Tac. *Hist.* I 5; Suet. *Galb.* 12, 1 with DAMON (2003) *comm ad loc.*

²⁸ Cf. Tac. *Hist.* I 6. Cf. also Suet. *Galb.* 11-12; Plut. *Galb.* 15, 4; and DAMON (2003), 106-110.

²⁹ Cf. Tac. *Hist.* I 5-8. For MURISON (1993), 60, Galba's behavior, especially towards the praetorians, was «utterly foolish».

³⁰ For Galba's death in other sources, see Suet. *Galb.* 19-20; Plut. *Galb.* 26-27; D.C. LXIV 7, 4.

³¹ Twenty-three soldiers from the Bodyguard saluted Otho as emperor on 15th January. Cf. Tac. *Hist.* I 27.

³² Cf. Tac. *Hist.* I 12; 51. *Sacramentum*: literally means 'oath', in this case, the military oath or *sacramentum militare* was the oath taken by the soldiers swearing their loyalty to the emperor, cf. Veg. *Mil.* II 5. See also ASH (2009), 90-91.

³³ Vitellius was made head of the army in Lower Germany, cf. D.C. LXIII 4; Tac. *Hist.* I 18-19.

³⁴ Tac. *Hist.* I 50: *Trepidam urbem ac simul atrocitatem recentis sceleris.*

different reasons, so that a single cause can conceal a whole range of varied motives. Even the process of declaring war tends to be less organized than in a foreign conflict, where an individual does not have to choose sides. As Ash puts it, «escalation, rather than a deliberate declaration of war, typifies civil conflict, which makes untangling the moral issues particularly challenging»³⁵. It was total confusion. Otho himself did not even know whether he was still a private citizen (*privatus*) or the emperor (*imperator populi Romani*), or even a public enemy (*hostis*)³⁶. And people in the city held loyalty cheap; for them, unstable governments meant that fear and flattery became general practice, and the more endemic they became, the greater was the danger, because it affected everyone (cf. Tac. *Hist.* I 33; 36).

A distinctive characteristic of both fear and civil war, that can increase axiological confusion in the agents, is the corruption of language. Thucydides had expressed this long before Tacitus. The passage on *stasis* at Corcyra is a classic example of Thucydides showing that civil war and the devaluation of language mutually reinforced one another: «they exchanged their usual evaluations of deeds for new ones, in the light of what they now thought justified»³⁷. Subversion of political vocabulary was something that Thucydides had denounced as an inevitable feature of internal political struggle, and Sallust would pick this up in his presentation of decline: «in very truth we have long since lost the true names for things»³⁸. Remarkably, Tacitus has Otho accusing Galba of corrupting language or changing the customary meaning of words: «For what other men call crimes he [Galba] calls ‘remedies’, falsely naming cruelty ‘strictness’, avarice ‘frugality’; the punishment and insults you suffer, ‘discipline’»³⁹.

Obviously corruption of language leads to confusion, and if the terms in question are value words - such as the virtues and vices that Tacitus indicated through Otho’s mouth - this will give rise to axiological confusion. Ugly and disgraceful actions like cruelty, avarice or torture need to be labeled with positive-sounding words taken from the traditional canon of Roman virtues: *severitas*, *parsimonia*, *disciplina*. Words and language are the means that sustain communication in society; if words become corrupted, the life of society will not remain unaffected. Otho accuses Galba of reshaping the evaluation of what is considered cruelty or insults; thus he will unconsciously start changing the grounds on which he operates and, in the end, his conduct. Words can not only create realities, but also shift standards of behavior, producing confusion and misperception towards good and evil.

³⁵ ASH (1999), 2.

³⁶ Tac. *Hist.* I 37. For Tacitus on Otho, see STOLTE (1973); SOCHAT (1981b); KEITEL (1984); PERKINS (1993); for Otho in general, WELLESLEY (1975); MORGAN (2006); ROCHE (2008); CHARLES-ANAGNOSTOU-LAOUTIDES (2014).

³⁷ Th. III 82, 4: καὶ τὴν εἰωθυῖαν ἀξιῶσιν τῶν ὀνομάτων ἐς τὰ ἔργα ἀντήλλαξαν τῆ δικαιῶσει. Wilson’s translation in (1982), 18-20. Cf. also SWAIN (1993).

³⁸ In Cato’s speech at the Senate, *Cat.* 52, 11: *iam pridem equidem nos vera vocabula rerum amisimus*. For more corruption of language in Sallust, see *Hist.* I 55, 24; III 48, 12-13.

³⁹ Tac. *Hist.* I 37: *Nam quae alii scelera, hic remedia vocat, dum falsis nominibus severitatem pro saevitia, parsimoniam pro avaritia, supplicia et contumelias vestras disciplinam appellat*. For the corruption of language in Thucydides, Sallust and Tacitus, see SPIELBERG (2017).

In Tacitus' account, Galba was responsible for inspiring fear and discontent not only in the soldiers, but also in the people, and therefore he was accountable for creating the climate for confusion to arise. Soldiers and civilians became so confused that the former betrayed and killed their old emperor; the latter insulted him and flattered the newly-acclaimed one, not knowing what was best for them. In the events of January AD 69 narrated by Tacitus, fear, anger, resentment were emotions that confused and clouded the intellect's ability to choose right over wrong. The historian does not accuse Galba of acting out of these emotions, but he holds the emperor accountable for having awoken them in others. The confusion created extends to Tacitus' final ambiguous and almost contradictory judgment on Galba's person and his government: «his own character was mediocre, rather free from vices than rich in virtues [...] when he was a commoner he was too big for his station: the universal view was that he had the qualifications to be a ruler - if only he had not ruled»⁴⁰.

II

Even though fear and the lack of *fides* (*perfidia*) appear as paramount for Tacitus in explaining the confusion and chaos in which the different scenarios of the empire were immersed in AD 69, it was not always possible even to define whether some individuals were in fact loyal or disloyal to their cause⁴¹. The confusion of the times provided no clear panorama, and commanders did not commit themselves to one cause lest it proved inexpedient. «There were many desertions, as is always the case in civil wars»⁴².

Throughout Tacitus' narrative, ambiguous or wavering behaviors are seen in leaders and generals who, according to the historian, should have behaved otherwise and followed superior motives. This «failure of leadership» has even been offered as an explanation for the three successive civil wars⁴³. And it is in the Vitellian faction where Tacitus portrays this failure more prominently, with several important generals betraying their emperor. Even though Tacitus undoubtedly considered it a good thing that Vitellius was vanquished, that did not mean that those who switched their allegiance to Vespasian should be praised, because they had twice committed treason towards their emperors, first Galba and then Vitellius⁴⁴. Among these commanders, we find Vitellius' principal aide: Caecina.

⁴⁰ Tac. *Hist.* I 49, quoted above n. 23.

⁴¹ For *perfidia*, see I 51; II 27; II 60; II 99-100; III 4; III 9; III 12; III 31; III 46; III 57; III 61-62; III 70; III 86.

⁴² Tac. *Hist.* I 34: *crebris, ut in civili bello, transfugiis*. See also II 75: *fluxam per discordias militum fidem*.

⁴³ Cf. MASTER (2012), 85.

⁴⁴ Tac. *Hist.* III 86: *rei publicae haud dubie intererat Vitellium vinci, sed imputare perfidiam non possunt qui Vitellium Vespasiano prodidere, cum a Galba descivissent*. See YAVETZ (1969).

A. Caecina Alienus is described by Tacitus as a handsome young man of great ambition, who had won over the legions he was in charge of by his skillful oratory⁴⁵. He had supported Galba after Nero's death, but had afterwards joined Vitellius' army in Germany and, together with Fabius Valens - his colleague and, later, rival - had defeated Otho's troops at Bedriacum. Tacitus records that Valens claimed to have saved Caecina's life - and perhaps boasted too much - and enjoyed the fervent support of the legions of the Lower Germany, hinting that this may have been the reason why Caecina's loyalty to Vitellius started to waver (cf. Tac. *Hist.* II 93). However, a couple of chapters later the historian suggests different theories for Caecina's change, not actually endorsing any one of them. Tacitus mentions Caecina's old ambition (*ambitio vetus*) and newly acquired indolence (*torpor recens*) which, together with the memory of his hatred and jealousy (*odiorum invidiaeque*) for Valens as Vitellius' favorite, may have moved him «to acquire credit and influence with a new emperor» (Tac. *Hist.* II 99, i.e. Vespasian).

In spite of having different characters and temperaments, during the campaign to put Vitellius on the throne Valens and Caecina had previously worked together, overcoming their apparent rivalry and suspicion: «they laid aside their hatred and devoted themselves to the common interest»⁴⁶. They had won the decisive first battle of Bedriacum and made progress together on their march towards Rome. Tacitus explains that when jealousy and fear of losing the first place in Vitellius' favor took hold of Caecina, he decided to change sides to the Flavians and abandon Vitellius. Furthermore, he used all his resources to undermine his own legions' loyalty to the emperor (cf. Tac. *Hist.* II 101). The axiological confusion here is evident: when *fides* is corrupted - and Tacitus talks of *vilem fidem* (worthless loyalty, Tac. *Hist.* II 101) - there are no longer any clear signposts to the right course of action. Instead of collaboration with comrades for the benefit of the *res publica*, times of civil war subverted ideals into zeal for one's own expediency and advancement, obliterating the honorable path. Caecina had first transferred his loyalty from Galba to Vitellius, then from Vitellius to Vespasian, but it seemed that he could not remain loyal to anyone. In AD 79 he was accused of conspiring with Eprius Marcellus against the emperor Vespasian and was murdered at a dinner party on Titus' orders (cf. Suet. *Tit.* 6, 2 and D.C. LXIV 16, 3). Caecina's disloyalty proved self-destructive.

Caecina's betrayal is narrated in some detail, as he was one of the two commanders-in-chief of the Vitellian forces, but he was not the only important general who deserted Vitellius. Sextus Lucilius Bassus had been promoted by Vitellius from prefect of the cavalry to commander of the fleets at Ravenna and Misenum, but according to Tacitus it was his disappointment at not being immediately (*non statim*) chosen as prefect of the Praetorian Guard that set in motion his treacherous plan to

⁴⁵ Cf. Tac. *Hist.* I 53, a very different description from the one found in Plut. *Otho* 6, 3: «Caecina had neither the speech nor the outward appearance of a Roman citizen, but was offensive and strange, a man of huge stature.»

⁴⁶ Tac. *Hist.* II 30: *sed condito odio eandem utilitatem fovere.*

betray his emperor⁴⁷. The historian's words leave no doubt of the shame and guilt he attributes to Bassus' conduct in «taking the revenge of his unjust resentment with disgraceful treachery» (*iniquam iracundiam flagitiosa perfidia ulcisceretur*, Tac. *Hist.* II 100). Bassus' treason brought about the revolt of the fleet and their change to Vespasian's side (cf. Tac. *Hist.* III 12). As with Caecina, Tacitus implies that Bassus also took an active part in corrupting the fleet which, having previously served Otho, were not too reluctant to rebel (cf. Tac. *Hist.* II 101). Bassus himself was temporarily taken prisoner, but soon set free. He was later appointed governor of the province of Judaea in AD 71, and died a year or two after that (cf. Joseph. *BJ* VII 6).

Caecina and Bassus are both described by Tacitus as dishonest or bad men (*malos*) for betraying the emperor whom they had sworn an oath to protect (Tac. *Hist.* II 100). However, the same or even more censure falls to the historians who, when recording these turbulent times during the Flavian dynasty, had justified the conduct of the two generals as being «patriotic and desirous of peace» (*curam pacis et amorem rei publicae*). In fact Tacitus uses the verb «betray» to refer to these historians, who were prepared to falsify the truth in order to flatter: *corruptas in adulationem causas, tradidere*⁴⁸. This is the *veritas pluribus modis infracta* («truth shattered in many different ways») to which Tacitus refers at the beginning of the *Histories*: because such false historians cared more for peace, they betrayed truth.

Another significant disloyal defection from Vitellius' side recorded by Tacitus is the case of Valerius Festus. According to Tacitus, this Valerius was a young relative of Vitellius and commander of the legion in Africa (cf. Tac. *Hist.* IV 49), who at first loyally supported the Vitellian faction and joined in the enthusiasm of the provincials. Tacitus does not give an explanation of why he soon (*mox*) became unsteady and began double dealing: supporting Vitellius officially but staying in secret communication with Vespasian⁴⁹. The undoubted advantage of his deceit was that he could quickly change his support to whichever side proved victorious. Probably Valerius soon realized that Vitellius' side was less prepared and did not look very promising.

Valerius' axiological confusion is clearly shown when Tacitus reports that, after Vitellius' death and therefore now eager to prove his allegiance to Vespasian, Valerius was involved in the assassination of L. Calpurnius Piso, governor of the province of Africa, who had been accused of plotting against the emperor Vespasian (cf. Tac. *Hist.* IV 49-50). Making sure that Piso was in fact murdered in the confusion of the moment, Valerius Festus won gratitude from the Flavians and was later rewarded by a long career of service under the emperor Domitian⁵⁰. In narrating this episode, Tacitus contrasts this example of perfidious personal expediency with the noble conduct of a slave who, when he realized that Piso was going to be killed, bravely gave

⁴⁷ Cf. Tac. *Hist.* II 100-101; III 12. According to ASH (2007b), 378, *non statim* underscores Tacitus' disapproval as it makes it look like an impatient and unrealistic desire.

⁴⁸ Tac. *Hist.* II 101: *curam pacis et amorem rei publicae*.

⁴⁹ Tac. *Hist.* II 98: *ac primo Valerius Festus legatus studia provincialium cum fide iuvit*.

⁵⁰ For Valerius Festus' later career, see GALLIVAN (1981), 186-220 and ABASCAL (2018).

his life for his master⁵¹. This slave was probably one of the «slaves [with] a fidelity which defied even torture» (Tac. *Hist.* I 3), whom Tacitus talks about at the beginning of the *Histories*.

These changed allegiances and broken oaths certainly did not look like the struggle for personal glory of republican times: then - at least in theory - the generals had competed in acts of *virtus* for the benefit of the *res publica*, and attained glory as a consequence. Now, by contrast, they competed not in acts of courage but cunning to destroy their rivals and secure their own future in safety. Tacitus describes these commanders as having taken advantage of the situation, and when the test came, they chose the *utile* (expedient) over the *honestum* (honorable) course of action, working for their own personal benefit instead of the good of Rome⁵². Their confusion was of a different sort from that produced under Galba. The confusion created by the old emperor made others mistake what was good and what was evil. Vitellius' commanders, on the contrary, seemed to have lost sight of the fact that what was good for themselves was not always good for Rome; accordingly, the decisions they took had near-disastrous consequences for the Empire. Tacitus clearly blames Vitellius' military leaders for the anxiety and restlessness felt by Vitellius' own party: «Nor on the side of Vitellius were men's minds at ease; their distress, however, arose from more fatal discord, due not to the suspicions of the common soldiers, but to the treachery of the commanders»⁵³. Amidst the turmoil of a civil war it was certainly difficult to establish what it meant to fight *rei publicae causa* and to stay firm; but working for individual aims and fostering one's own advancement while risking the wellbeing of the state was certainly not the way.

III

In his *Histories*, Tacitus shows that in a situation of political disorder, chaos and especially fear, everybody is more liable to err in the perception of what is good or bad for them and make the wrong decision. His narrative illustrates this liability persistently. However, Tacitus also makes clear that these circumstances may have made people more prone to confusion, but they did not necessarily force them to it or determine their actions.

It is quite significant, then, that in the midst of all the horrible crimes, treachery and falsity during the civil wars, Tacitus - as if to give the reader a respite - narrates the acts of the few who did maintain their judgement unaffected and behaved nobly. At the beginning of the work he had acknowledged that there was still room for

⁵¹ Tac. *Hist.* IV 50: *servus egregio mendacio se Pisonem esse respondit ac statim obtruncatur.*

⁵² Tacitus makes a similar judgement about Antonius Primus, and also other generals who helped the emperors of AD 69 along their way towards power, such as Fabius Valens. For Tacitus' treatment of these generals, see for example, DOREY (1958); MORGAN (1994a), (1997) and (2006), 174-189; MEULDER (1995); ASH (1999).

⁵³ Tac. *Hist.* III 12: *Ne in Vitellii quidem partibus quietae mentes: exitiosiore discordia non suspicionibus vulgi, sed perfidia ducum turbabantur.*

virtues: «Yet this age was not so barren of virtue that it did not display noble examples»⁵⁴. He describes good mothers and wives supporting or accompanying their sons and husbands; men displaying courage and firmness; and slaves showing their loyalty⁵⁵. In the last section of this paper, I would like to show what Tacitus sees as the defining factors that make people maintain their principles and values even under terrible circumstances⁵⁶. It is with these examples that Tacitus the historian becomes a guide; by providing instances of good behavior, he directs the readers out of confusion.

If fear was the general condition and emotional state of the majority under a civil war - because it was difficult to know which side would end up being stronger - it follows that it was the opposite of fear that made some people overcome the inaction or paralysis created by fear on the one hand, or the rashness resulting from fear on the other. Tacitus emphasizes a particular quality that seemed to counteract fear, and work as its antidote, namely firmness or *constantia*.

Constantia or steadfastness consisted mainly of keeping one's independence of thought, being determined to hold on to one's principles and not changing them out of expediency or fear. This was certainly an aspect of the virtue of courage (*virtus*), although perhaps expressed in a subtler way than the spectacular bravery that soldiers could show in battle⁵⁷. Tacitus gives examples of the *constantia* of military men such as Julius Agrestis and Vocula, whom he praises for being two good generals who restored discipline in the armies and showed «outstanding determination» (*notabilis constantia*) and «admirable firmness» (*mira constantia*) respectively⁵⁸. This, of course, contrasted greatly with - for example - Galba's «disgraceful want of firmness» (*foeda inconstantia*) exhibited at some point⁵⁹, or the «innate fickleness» (*insita levitas*) displayed by many (Tac. *Hist.* II 101). *Constantia* was a way of expressing valor and determination to maintain one's loyalties in spite of danger; firmness in the pursuit of one's aims in life without being swayed by good or bad circumstances.

Certainly, a model of constancy in the *Histories* is Marius Celsus⁶⁰. In AD 63 Celsus had led the Fifteenth Legion to war against the Parthians (cf. Tac. *Ann.* XV 25), and was designated by Nero as suffect consul for AD 69. Later he was called to be an adviser to Galba, to whom he remained loyal till the end⁶¹. After Galba's death, Celsus was in danger of being killed, but when he pleaded guilty of constant loyalty

⁵⁴ Tac. *Hist.* I 3: *non tamen adeo virtutum sterile saeculum ut non et bona exempla prodiderit.*

⁵⁵ Tac. *Hist.* I 3: *Comitatae profugos liberos matres, secutae maritos in exilia coniuges: propinqui audentes, constantes generi, contumax etiam adversus tormenta servorum fides; supremae clarorum virorum necessitates fortiter toleratae et laudatis antiquorum mortibus pares exitus.*

⁵⁶ For good men in Tacitus in general, see ŘÍHOVÁ (1974).

⁵⁷ For the role of *virtus* and *constantia*, see BALMACEDA (2017), 199-208.

⁵⁸ Tac. *Hist.* III 54 and IV 26 respectively. On Vocula see ASH (2010), 211-231.

⁵⁹ Tac. *Hist.* I 19. The same idea is conveyed in I 7, referring to his «weakness of character» (*mobilis ingenii*).

⁶⁰ On Celsus, see TOWNEND (1962); SHOTTER (1978), 197-200.

⁶¹ Cf. Tac. *Hist.* I 45: *Marium Celsum, consulem designatum et Galbae usque in extremas res amicum fidumque.*

to Galba (*constanter servatae erga Galbam fidei crimen confessus*), Otho saved him and took him into his inner circle (*inter intimos amicos habuit*, Tac. *Hist.* I 71). Tacitus also shows Celsus working faithfully and prudently under Otho, displaying his energy (*industria*) and vigor (*vigor*), and even after the emperor's fall, Celsus was able to maintain his consulship under Vitellius (a remarkable fact considering that he found himself on the 'wrong', defeated, side). He survived the civil wars and under Vespasian served as governor of Germania Inferior⁶².

Tacitus portrays Celsus as working for the regime, using all his talents and achieving brilliant successes (*res egregiae gestae*, Tac. *Hist.* II 24), but never allowing his blameless character (*innocentia*) to be compromised (cf. Tac. *Hist.* I 45). Throughout his career, Celsus was in real danger several times, the worst being when after Galba's murder, the soldiers asked for Celsus' capital punishment. In their confusion they demanded Celsus' life, because after having killed the emperor, they were obviously afraid of his faithful friend. Out of fear-inspired axiological confusion «they hated his energy and upright character as if they were vicious qualities» (Tac. *Hist.* I 45), instead of trying to win over the good man to their side for the new government. Celsus, however, never defended himself at the cost of his honesty or principles. Moreover, together with his *constantia*, he displayed remarkable loyalty: *fides integra* (Tac. *Hist.* I 71).

Fides became a serious concern in times of civil war, as it was necessary to maintain one's loyalty to the emperor to whom one had sworn allegiance. Traditionally, *fides* inspired brave actions and also implied a touch of magnanimity in the sense that the loyal subordinate was able to put his own benefit in second place for the sake of a larger cause, namely the *res publica*, in this case, the emperor. But *fides* could be a dangerous quality in civil war, as faithfulness and loyalty were held cheap owing to the instability of emperors holding on to unsteady power. Besides, for a subordinate to be loyal to his commander when the latter was not totally worthy of this loyalty could be counted as unsafe. However, Tacitus' praise of Celsus' *constantia* in showing *fides* first to Galba and then, after his death, to Otho, suggests that Tacitus saw *fides* as a quality which required much courage and firmness.

Marius Celsus in Tacitus is especially moderate in his desires; industrious in his work as a general, a good leader to his soldiers, prudent, and above all, firm in his loyalty to whoever stood at the head of the *res publica*. He may be one of the great men under bad emperors (*viri magni sub malis principibus*) to whom Tacitus referred in the *Agricola* (42, 5), since he did what he could to contribute to the welfare of the state even in civil war.

Also faithful, but less fortunate than Marius Celsus was Junius Blaesus, whose steadfast loyalty is also praised by Tacitus. This Blaesus first appears in the *Historiae* joining the Vitellian forces in Book I (59) and later on Tacitus gives a more complete portrait of this man whom he would even qualify as *sanctus*, a high tribute indeed

⁶² Cf. ECK (1982), 287-91.

(Tac. *Hist.* III 39). Blaesus came from an illustrious family⁶³ and was very rich, generous, and cultured in character. The sum of these qualities seems to have confused Vitellius: very soon the emperor was convinced - particularly by his brother, Lucius Vitellius - that Blaesus was a threat to the throne, but he camouflaged his hatred under servile flattery⁶⁴. Tacitus shows Vitellius' behavior as unreasonable, since it makes no sense to destroy a man of steadfast loyalty (*fidei obstinatio*), who put all his resources into supporting the emperor and had no interest at all in becoming head of the empire (cf. Tac. *Hist.* III 39).

Tacitus shows how Blaesus' *fides* - a virtue to be treasured in times of sedition and betrayal - counted for nothing, as Vitellius mistakenly feared his faithful friend. Finally, Blaesus, victim of Vitellius' confused and fearful state of mind - *trepidanti inter scelus metumque* - was poisoned by the emperor⁶⁵. Here it is the emperor's conduct which falls prey to axiological confusion, «behaving irrationally and failing to see what is in his best interests»⁶⁶.

Tacitus intersperses more examples of great loyalty and firmness throughout the narrative, such as the case of Sempronius Densus, a centurion who, in spite of being seriously wounded, bravely defended Piso during the sedition against Galba and enabled him to escape (cf. Tac. *Hist.* I 31); or the governor of Raetia, Porcius Septiminus, who remained incorruptibly loyal to Vitellius (cf. Tac. *Hist.* III 5). Further examples of fidelity are the four centurions of the Twenty-Second Legion, Nonius, Donatius, Romilius and Calpurnius, who remained faithful to Galba and were therefore executed on the orders of Vitellius, their crime being loyalty, «worst of charges among rebels»⁶⁷.

It was clear, then, that *constantia* and *fides* in civil war demanded refusing to be ruled by fear or to act on it. According to Tacitus it was firmness and steadfastness that made these exemplary men keep a clear head and not become confused as to what was right or wrong, regardless of how everybody else was behaving. Tacitus shows how the dilemma of choosing between the honorable course (*honestum*) and the advantageous one (*utile*) was solved in the ideal Ciceronian way, that is, by choosing the *honestum* or the right thing to do, which won them the glory of posterity and in this sense became advantageous and beneficial as well.

By means of his narration of history, Tacitus shows how and why some Romans were prevented from acting according to particular virtues and took the wrong path during the frenzied year of the four emperors. He demonstrates how axiological confusion works by taking a very Roman approach to the historical records of a particularly complex period. Focusing on the behavior of different figures, he gives

⁶³ He had the Antonii and the Junii as his ancestors, cf. III 38.

⁶⁴ Tac. *Hist.* II 59. For Junius Blaesus, see ASH (2007b), *comm ad loc.*

⁶⁵ For the episode of Blaesus' death at III 38-39, see MILLER-JONES (1978); GALTIER (1981). Another account of Blaesus' death is narrated - without naming him - by Suet. *Vit.* 14.

⁶⁶ LEVENE (1997), 139.

⁶⁷ Tac. *Hist.* I 59: *fidei crimine, gravissimo inter desciscantis.*

examples to imitate or to avoid (cf. Liv. *Praef.* 10), and thus illustrates axiological confusion in action.

Tacitus shows the tensions and ambiguities of the period he is recounting; he is concerned not only to denote bad examples, but also to find new role models and steer the reader between rash action on the one hand and servile passivity on the other. Vital to his purpose was the portrayal of good and active Romans who maintained their *fides* in spite of personal danger and for whom *constantia* in working for the *res publica* was paramount.

In Tacitus' view, the civil wars that followed Nero's death made political behavior more radical. Widespread confusion and chaos had major ill effects on the capacity for discernment exercised by emperors, soldiers and people, preventing them from evaluating actions according to the customary criteria of good and bad. The turmoil of continuous civil wars that produced persistent fear and mistrust among Romans resulted in the axiological confusion that Tacitus illustrates with expert skill. The narrative portraying this confusion with all its bad examples, moreover, helps him to fulfil «the highest function of history»: that, in spite of everything, «virtues may not be passed over in silence»⁶⁸.

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⁶⁸ Tac. *Ann.* III 65: *praecipuum munus annalium [...] ne virtutes sileantur*.

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