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Tacitus and the 'Battle' of Tarracina

(Histories 3, 76–77)

By M. Gwyn Morgan, Austin

In between the unsuccessful uprising by Flavius Sabinus that leads to the burning of the Capitol (Hist. 3, 69–74) and the final assault on Rome by Antonius Primus that brings down Vitellius (ibid. 78–86), Tacitus sets two chapters in which he recounts the annihilation by L. Vitellius, the emperor's brother, of a group of Vitellian renegades and Flavian desperadoes who had seized control of Tarracina. On any reckoning there are a few loose ends in this narrative, and it would be difficult plausibly to maintain that Tacitus lavished on this interlude the attention he devoted to the two major episodes which flank it. Some editors, however, go much further, contending that the segment is marred by decidedly careless writing. As I hope to show, this assessment is extreme. Even if the account is not perfect, Tacitus knows what he is doing here.

The background for the incident Tacitus has set up some twenty chapters earlier (Hist. 3, 57, 1–58, 1), reporting that when the Misene fleet deserted Vitellius, its commander Claudius Apollinaris (*neque fidei constans neque strenuus in perfidia*) was joined by the ex-praetor Apinius Tiro, *tum forte Minturnis agens*, and together they set about winning over the cities of Campania, themselves divided by municipal rivalry. To deal with the problem, Vitellius first sent out Claudius Iulianus (*is nuper classem Misenensem molli imperio rexerat*) to win back the men, giving him as support an urban cohort and the gladiators he already commanded¹. Then, when Iulianus joined the deserters almost at once and with them occupied Tarracina, *moenibus situque magis quam ipsorum ingenio tutam*, Vitellius dispatched his brother Lucius with six cohorts and 500 cavalry. It is from this point that the first, shorter and supposedly more problematical of our two chapters picks up²: *isdem diebus L. Vitellius positus apud Feroniam castris excidio Tarracinae imminebat, clausis illic gladiatoribus remigibusque, qui non egredi moenia neque periculum in*

1 Iulianus is the only one of the three men for whom we have information besides that provided by Tacitus. Pliny, *NH* 37, 45 declares that he was in charge of a display of gladiators given by Nero. See Groag, *PIR*² A 917; Stein, *PIR*² C 781 and C 893.

2 I use the Teubner text by H. Heubner (Stuttgart 1978), and all references hereafter are to the *Histories* unless stated otherwise. For brevity's sake, the following works are cited henceforth by author's or editor's name and page number only: A. Gerber/A. Greef, *Lexicon Taciteum* (Leipzig 1903); H. Goelzer, *Œuvres de Tacite: Histoires, Livres III–V* (Paris 1920); H. Heubner, *P. Cornelius Tacitus, Die Historien, Band III: Drittes Buch* (Heidelberg 1972); K. Wellesley, *Tacitus, The Histories, Book iii* (Sydney 1972).

aperto audebant. praeerat, ut supra memoravimus, Iulianus gladiatoribus, Apollinaris remigibus, lascivia socordiaque gladiatorum magis quam ducum similes. non vigilias agere, non intuta moenium firmare: noctu dieque fluxi et amoena litorum personantes, in ministerium luxus dispersis militibus, de bello tantum inter convivia loquebantur. paucos ante dies discesserat Apinius Tiro donisque ac pecuniis acerbe per municipia conquirendis plus invidiae quam virium partibus addebat.

In all, three criticisms have been levelled against this chapter (a fourth, elicited by the second chapter, will be discussed below). Of these two are relatively trivial: first, that Tacitus makes no mention of the urban cohort which Vitellius had made over to Claudius Iulianus³; and second, that Tacitus contradicts himself, saying that the desperadoes dared not go outside the walls at one point and then that their commanders were reeling about the seashore (outside the walls), when they filled the bay with their uproar⁴. More important by far, however, is the claim that the three references to gladiators are infelicitous, that the antithesis set up in *lascivia socordiaque gladiatorum magis quam ducum similes* is lame, and that since Tacitus nowhere else ascribes either *lascivia* or *socordia* to such men, we must emend *gladiatorum*, be it to *praedatorum*, *gregariorum*, *comissatorum*, *calonum*, or *latronum*⁵.

Obviously we need to deal first with this matter of gladiators, and so far as I can see, there are two ways of defending *gladiatorum*, the first being to concede that Tacitus is guilty of carelessness. There is not much point, it seems, in remarking that the textual tradition uniformly supports the reading⁶, since this can be countered with the observation that all our manuscripts derive from the Mediceus. Nor have the champions of emendation been deterred by the fact that neither *comissator* nor *praedator* is to be found elsewhere in Tacitus, that *latro* is used only in the 'Annals', and that *calo*, albeit limited to the 'Histories', is coupled with *lixa* in the four passages where it appears prior to the sentence we are considering⁷. Of the various suggestions offered so far, indeed, only Andresen's *gregariorum* has much to recommend it: palaeographically it is closest to *gladiatorum*; there is a linkage with *socordia* (though not with *lascivia*), inasmuch as Tacitus has described the Vitellian soldiery as *futuri socors* at the time of the attack on Cremona (3, 31, 2); and *gregarii* is no

3 See L. Valmaggi, *Cornelio Tacito, Il libro terzo delle Storie* (Turin 1906) 103; Goelzer 147; Wellesley 178.

4 So Wellesley 178.

5 So G. Andresen, *Jahresber. Philol. Verein.* 48 (1922) 53f., repeated by E. Wolff/G. Andresen, *Taciti Historiarum Libri*, 2. Heft: *Buch III, IV und V*² (Berlin 1926) 99, arguing for *gregariorum*; Wellesley 178, now superseded by his Teubner edition (Leipzig 1989), offering the other suggestions; W. S. Watt, *AJPh* 109 (1988) 360, dismissing all proposals save Andresen's *gregariorum*, but suggesting *calonum*.

6 Thus Heubner 178; A. B. Černjak, *Philologus* 125 (1981) 256f.

7 See Gerber/Greef 745a for *latro* (four examples), and 148a for *calo*. The latter word is linked with *lixa* at 1, 49, 1; 2, 87, 1; 3, 20, 3; and 3, 33, 1. It stands alone only at 4, 60, 2.

odder a term to apply to a mixture of rowers and gladiators than is the *milites* employed a few lines later (*in ministerium luxus dispersis militibus*)⁸. Nonetheless, it is surely illogical to tinker with the text, if the chapter is as carelessly written as has been contended. On this view, the various emendations are much more likely to represent what Tacitus ought to have written than what he did write, *gladiatorum*.

The second and more plausible option is to argue that Tacitus put down *gladiatorum* deliberately, not solely because of the recalcitrance of the material, but to emphasize the total breakdown of discipline in Tarracina⁹. Throughout the first three books of the 'Histories' there is a constant tension between the leaders and the led. It is rare to come upon a general able, like Antonius Primus, to keep his men under control or, if they break away, to bring them again to heel. But whether the rankers seize the initiative and drag their officers after them (cf. 2, 18, 2; 3, 49, 2), or the officers complain bitterly about the malcontents entrusted to them (cf. 1, 82, 3; 2, 36, 2), anarchy can be avoided only if the troops are brought to the realization that it is disastrous to forget this distinction between officers and men (cf. 2, 29, 2; 3, 18, 1; and especially 3, 20, 1–2). The same applies to the commanders. It is easy to be misled by commonplaces about generals who share the hardships of the common soldiery (thus 2, 5, 1 of Vespasian)¹⁰; we ought rather to note the praise of Titus, *in agmine gregario milite mixtus incorrupto ducis honore* (5, 1, 1). Now, given that Tacitus has already characterized Apollinaris and Iulianus as inadequate commanders (3, 57), the former a waverer (*neque fidei constans neque strenuus in perfidia*) and the latter over-indulgent (he commanded the fleet *molli imperio*), there is no reason to expect much in the way of discipline in Tarracina, *moenibus situque magis quam ipsorum ingenio tuta*. But since it is anarchy that Tacitus goes on to describe in our chapter, it makes good sense for him to liken these two incompetents to their men and, by so doing, demonstrate how oblivious they have become to the vital distinction between leaders and led. And the condemnation is much more biting, the antithesis much more forceful, if they are compared not to legionaries nor even to marines, but to gladiators, a *deforme ... auxilium, sed per civilia arma etiam severis ducibus usurpatum* (2, 11, 2). Never *severi duces*, Apollinaris and Iulianus are no longer

8 As Wellesley 178 remarks, we may see *remiges* as a variation for *classici*, since there appears to have been no formal distinction between rowers and marines at this date: cf. C. G. Starr, *The Roman Imperial Navy, 31 B.C.–A.D. 324*² (Cambridge 1960) 59. But *milites* is still a strange term for a group that includes gladiators, and seems to be generated here by an antithesis with the preceding *ducum*.

9 At 3, 57 the threefold repetition of *classis* in twelve lines is due probably to the exigencies of the subject matter. But at 2, 59, 2–3 the appearance of *principali*, *principi*, *principalis* within twelve lines is more likely to be emphatic.

10 Cf. *Ann.* 13, 35, 4. Note too that in every case where an emperor uses the term *commilito*, it reinforces the distinction between leaders and led: thus Piso (1, 29, 2; 30, 2), Otho (1, 37, 1; 38, 1; 83, 2; 84, 2), and most conspicuously, Galba (1, 35, 2).

even indulgent generals; *duces* in title only, they have become one with the *deforme auxilium* in all else: *gladiatorum magis quam ducum similes*.

To all this it may be objected that Tacitus nowhere else attributes *lascivia* or *socordia* to gladiators. This is a slender reed on which to lean. Though Tacitus makes numerous references to gladiators and their shows, the vast majority of his editorial comments express solely a generalised aristocratic contempt¹¹. On their use in war he makes but two observations, characterizing them – as we have seen – as a *deforme auxilium*, and remarking that in battle they showed less *constantia* than regular soldiers (2, 35, 1), a point borne out by the fact that few of the gladiators offered resistance to L. Vitellius' assault on Tarracina (3, 77, 2: *pauci gladiatorum resistentes neque inulti cecidere*). However, there is one reference which shows that he knows more of the gladiatorial regimen than might otherwise be supposed. Though he twists his material in order to denigrate Vitellius, he is clearly aware that gladiators ate better than ordinary soldiers¹². This being the case, it seems ill advised to suppose Tacitus ignorant of the sexual attraction gladiators had for Roman women of every social class, an attraction he could justifiably term *lascivia*¹³. Similarly, Auguet probably overstates his case when he contends that gladiators fought only two or three times a year, but Ville too comments on the irregular nature of their employment, “une alternance de périodes fastes suivies de longs chômages”¹⁴. It would be unfair, but by no means impossible, for Tacitus to disregard the time these men spent in training and to describe their routine as *socordia*.

Given that the comparison of Apollinaris and Iulianus with gladiators should not only be accepted as the correct reading but also be regarded as deliberate and emphatic writing, we may turn now to the two lesser criticisms made of this chapter. First, the non-mention of the urban cohort. If Apinius Tiro left Tarracina, as Tacitus says, a few days before L. Vitellius' arrival with the intention of raising funds, it is not merely a possibility that he took this cohort with him¹⁵; it is an unavoidable conclusion. Even if we ignore the disturbed conditions prevailing in Campania (3, 57, 1), it is difficult to see how Tiro could have dared to act harshly (*acerbe*) and to generate so much unpopu-

11 See *Dial.* 29, 3; *Ann.* 1, 76, 3; 11, 21, 1; 13, 49, 1; 15, 32. For a full list of references see Gerber/Greef 499.

12 See 2, 88, 1 with the comments of G. Ville, *La gladiature en Occident des origines à Domitien* (BEFAR fasc. 245, Rome 1981) 301f. This awareness may underlie Tacitus' comment here that Apollinaris and Iulianus *de bello tantum inter convivia loquebantur*. However, such behaviour is readily satirised. In more recent times it has been ridiculed as “war to the knife and fork”: see S. Nowell-Smith, *Edwardian England, 1901–1914* (Oxford 1964) 57.

13 See, e.g., Ville (note 12) 330f. That Tacitus makes no more of the matter here can be explained by his greater interest in the effects of war on women, evidenced by the behaviour of Triaria, in any case a formidable lady (2, 63, 2): *fuere qui ... Triariam incesserent, tamquam gladio militari cincta inter luctum cladesque expugnatae Tarracinae superbe saeveque egisset* (77, 3).

14 R. Auguet, *Cruelty and Civilization: the Roman Games* (London 1972) 179f.; Ville (note 12) 324f., the quotation from 325.

15 Thus Wellesley 178, twice.

larity (*plus invidiae quam virium partibus addebat*), unless he was supported by an armed escort, the urban cohort. Which is not to deny that there is a loose end here. Tacitus gives us no reason for Tiro's choosing this particular moment to depart, and no indication of the purpose for which he was seeking new resources. The chances are that he was attempting to spread the rebellion¹⁶, but he might rather have shared the tastes of his two colleagues and have gone in search of the means enabling them to maintain their current high standard of living. These, it is true, are not points that add much to our understanding of Tacitus' narrative, and it is conceivable that he answered these questions somewhere in the lost books of the 'Histories', always provided that Tiro found his way back into the record. As it is, we hear no more of the man or his fate.

It is time to consider the movements of Iulianus and Apollinaris, *fluxi et amoena litorum personantes*. The idea that the two men were wandering the beach when they created this uproar rests on a failure to see the force of *personantes*. This being the only occurrence of *personare* in the 'Histories' and its only use in this particular sense anywhere in Tacitus' works¹⁷, editors have always recognized that he is echoing two passages in Aeneid 6: in one Cerberus fills the infernal regions (*haec ... regna*) with his barking, and in the other Misenus, *demens*, fills the seas (*aequora*) with blasts on his trumpet, until his competition with the gods and his own playing are brought to an end by an enraged triton¹⁸. For our present purposes the important consideration is that neither Cerberus nor Misenus is actually in the area he fills with his noise: the former is described as *adverso recubans immanis in antro*, the latter as taking up his position *in litore sicco* or *inter saxa*¹⁹. By the same token, we are under no obligation to believe that the two commanders were on the seashore. Tacitus says merely that they filled it with their uproar, and that they could have done from within the walls: Tarracina lay below the Monte Sant'Angelo, from which *summum montium iugis* L. Vitellius' force *ad caedem magis quam ad pugnam decurrit* (3, 77, 1), and it takes little imagination to realise that any outcry within the town would have reverberated off the cliffs and have filled the entire area²⁰.

As for *amoena litorum*, this could be seen simply as an attempt to add to the vividness of the narrative²¹. In the two Vergilian passages, however, there

16 So P. A. L. Greenhalgh, *The Year of the Four Emperors* (London/New York 1975) 184.

17 Gerber/Greef 1111.

18 Vergil, *Aen.* 6, 417 and 171–173 respectively: see K. Heraeus, *Taciti Historiarum Libri*, 2. Band: *Buch III–V* (Berlin 1921) 72; Goelzer 147; Wellesley 178. It is tempting, but perhaps unwise, to suggest that Tacitus was thinking primarily of the Misenus episode, his subjects being defectors from the Misene fleet.

19 Vergil, *Aen.* 6, 418, 162 and 174 respectively.

20 Compare 1, 39, 1, where the uproar in the praetorian camp can be heard in Rome (*vocibus in urbem usque resonantibus*). The distance was no greater: the seashore lay less than ½ km from the town (Wellesley 155).

21 So Wellesley 178.

is heavy emphasis on the horror of the situation described, and that effect Tacitus could not capture merely by using the same verb. Here, surely, we have the reason for *amoena litorum*. There can be no doubt about the Romans' appreciation for the beauties of the area around Tarracina; it was one of the first neighbourhoods sought out by *nobiles* retiring to the countryside²², in other words, a place for peace and quiet. As Tacitus tells the story, Iulianus and Apollinaris show not the least appreciation for the beauty or the tranquillity of the region. On the contrary, they fill the *amoena litorum* with their unholy din and, in so doing, provide another, horrific indication of how far they have fallen from conduct befitting an officer and a gentleman.

There remains the one objection levelled against the second chapter. That L. Vitellius is able to overwhelm the desperadoes in Tarracina and drive them in rout out of the town and down to the harbour is due to his being approached by a slave, who leads a Vitellian force up the mountain and sets it *super caput hostium* (3, 77, 1). To introduce this development Tacitus states baldly *interim ad L. Vitellium servus Vergilii Capitonis perfugit*, and this has been taken as another indication of hasty composition²³. As things stand, there is no way of deciding whether the slave's owner is identical with or related to the Cn. Vergilius Capito who had been prefect of Egypt during Claudius' reign²⁴. Nor would it be plausible, I think, to make for this Vergilius Capito the claim that we can for Apinius Tiro and – if it comes to that – for Claudius Apollinaris, who escapes in the panic caused by L. Vitellius' attack, leaving his men in the lurch and another loose end in Tacitus' narrative, namely, that he would have turned up in the lost books of the 'Histories' and have been described more fully there. But whether we tax Tacitus with a failure or a refusal to provide more information, his brevity in this instance is far less striking than – say – his treatment of Claudius Severus, a leader in the Helvetians' resistance to Caecina and yet "only a name, not a person or an agent"²⁵. More important, it is not in any case the master but the slave who is the focus of attention, Tacitus making this clear – as Heubner observed – with the verb *perfugit*: "der Sklave ... handelte also eigenmächtig"²⁶. And what we know about the slave is that retribution overtook him in less than a month, when order was restored in the area. As Tacitus reports it, nothing was done to help the people of Tarracina

22 See J. H. D'Arms, *Romans on the Bay of Naples* (Cambridge, Mass. 1970) 5f. and, for full details, Philipp, RE 4A (1932) 2395ff. For our purposes the best illustrations of Silver sensibilities about the countryside may not be Pliny's enthusiastic letters (8, 8; 9, 13), but the various comments Tacitus makes: see 2, 87, 1; 3, 60, 1; 3, 63, 2 and 66, 2.

23 Wellesley 178.

24 The identity of the two men is normally taken for granted, as by Goelzer 148; Heubner 179; Wellesley 239; R. Syme, *Antichthon* 9 (1975) 67.

25 See 1, 68, 1; the quotation comes from the detailed discussion by R. Syme, *Mus. Helv.* 34 (1977) 135 = *Roman Papers* 3 (Oxford 1984) 991. For other examples see G. Townend, *Hermes* 89 (1961) 227f.

26 Heubner 179.

for what they had suffered: *solacio fuit servus Vergilii Capitonis, quem proditorem Tarracinensium diximus, patibulo adfixus in isdem anulis, quos acceptos a Vitellio gestabat* (4, 3, 2). There being reason to think that Tacitus would have given us the slave's name had he known it (cf. 2, 72, 2), we may legitimately infer that the confusion of the times and the slave's prompt execution caused his name to go unrecorded. In which case, we have no cause for complaint that the historian gives us the one detail that could be recovered, the identity of his owner²⁷.

There is one last matter to consider. Tacitus has to report this particular episode at this particular point in his work, since it explains why the one remaining, effective Vitellian force was away from Rome when the Flavians attacked. Having captured Tarracina, L. Vitellius sent to his brother a laureled dispatch, along with a request for further instructions. The delay this caused, so says Tacitus, *salutare non modo partibus Vespasiani, sed rei publicae fuit. nam si recens victoria miles et super insitam pervicaciam secundis ferox Romam contendisset, haud parva mole certatum nec sine exitio urbis foret* (3, 77, 4). However, once we recognize that the historian is pretty much in control of his material in these chapters, it becomes rather more plausible to argue that this interlude was intended also to contribute to the larger design of the book. A minor Vitellian victory, the episode is obviously set antithetically against a major Flavian disaster on the one side (Sabinus' failure), and against the ultimate Flavian victory on the other (Antonius Primus' capture of Rome). Further, it serves simultaneously as relief from the tragedies attendant upon the Capitol's destruction and the capture of Rome, and as a means of giving each tragedy its full impact by keeping them separate one from the other. But there is also the possibility that Tacitus paints the conduct of Iulianus and Apollinaris in the darkest hues for yet another reason. The very next chapter shows him concerned to offer some defence for the behaviour of Antonius Primus; to him as much as to anyone else applies the comment that *haud facile quis uni adsignaverit culpam quae omnium fuit* (78, 3). Given that there were those who considered Antonius the archetypal desperado, Tacitus may very well have exploited this episode to provide a detailed portrait of two genuine desperadoes. If nothing else, it would help to demonstrate that Antonius was more what Tacitus had termed him on his first appearance in the 'Histories' (2, 86, 2), *bello non spernendus*.

27 For all the uncertainties about the way in which Tacitus composed and published the *Histories*, there is a clear break between the end of the third book and the start of the fourth: see M. M. Sage, ANRW 2, 33, 2 (1990) 882ff. Hence I take the repetition of *servus Vergilii Capitonis* as one small means of bridging that gap.