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Soldiers and Leaders in Plutarch's *Galba* and *Otho*

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In this short paper, which is dedicated to Tony Birley in honour of his seventieth birthday, I would like to make a few notes on the way in which Plutarch in his *Galba* and *Otho* speaks about leadership and crowd, crowds in this case being military mobs.

Leadership and collective attitudes in Plutarch's works

A commonplace, which is widespread in Plutarch's *Lives*, and occurs also in his political treatises, regards the connection between the mental attitude of masses, either groups of soldiers or city-mobs, on the one hand, and the quality of leadership on the other. If urban mobs or soldiers are irreparably oriented towards violence and greed, and not to wisdom and stability, leaders cannot govern in a sound, wisdom-loving manner, but have to content themselves with an opportunistic, adroit kind of leadership, *i.e.* with the political behavior of politicians such as Timoleon or Julius Caesar.¹ If this type of adroit, non-philosophical leadership fails or is missing, and the mentality of soldiers or city-mobs is utterly materialistic and violent, things will take a turn for the worst.

In Plutarch's view, groups of soldiers were not much different from city mobs and demagoguery could be applied to both of them in a similar way. He praises Aemilius Paullus because this leader did not merge the demagogue in the general, οὐ δημαγωγῶν ἐν τῷ στρατηγεῖν (*Aem.* 3.6). Sulla, on the other hand, stirred up or spoiled his soldiers, just like mob flatterers within cities do (*Sulla* 12). In *Eumenes* 13.4-5 Plutarch describes the deteriorating mode of life and mentality of some military leaders during the wars of succession of post-Alexandrian times. They had become effeminate, tyrannical, and harsh towards one another and hard to reconcile. In *Eum.* 13.5 Plutarch continues:

Moreover, by flattering the Macedonian soldiery and lavishing money upon them for banquets and sacrifices, in a short time they made the camp a hostelry of festal prodigality and the army a mob to be cajoled into the election of its generals as in a democracy.

Groups of soldiers could act like urban mobs and vote like popular assemblies. According to Plutarch, *Marius* 21.2, Marius received by the votes of his soldiers a more than fair share of the booty assembled after the battle of Aquae Sextiae, where Marius' army had stopped the onslaught of the Teutonic warriors. In Plutarch's biography of Lucullus, 30 and 33-35, the army of this general acts like a political mob, under the guidance of demagogical leaders, Publius Clodius being one of them. Lucullus, however, stands firm, not being a servant of the *plethos stratiotikon* (οὐκ ὄν θεραπευτικὸς πλήθους στρατιωτικοῦ, *Plut., Luc.* 33.2), but in the end he forfeits his campaign and loses his army. His soldiers were angry, because they were compelled to spend two successive winters in camp (not in a city that was Greek and friendly, *ibid.* 33.2). Besides they suspected that Lucullus had taken most of the booty and had not given his men their due. So, in spite of his proven excellent generalship and after all his victories his soldiers left him in the lurch, because he had not given them their due, or - in a more Plutarchan way - complied to their greed.²

In Plutarch's opinion groups of soldiers, Greek and Macedonian mercenaries as well as Roman armies, had a strong materialistic attitude, which made them even more difficult than city mobs. In this respect Plutarch is standing in a tradition: prejudice about mercenaries is very old in Greek literature, as is testified by Xenophon and Isocrates.³

¹ See De Blois 1992, 4568-4615, esp. 4600-4611; De Blois 1997b, 209-224; De Blois 2000, 131-139, esp. 134 ff. Any translations of Plutarchan passages into English have been borrowed from Loeb editions.

² See De Blois 1992, 4606 f.

³ Isocrates, *Paneg.* 146; *Philippus* 120-122; Xenophon, *Anab.* 6.4.8; cf. Van Soesbergen 1982-1983, 131-145, esp. 132-139.

In Plutarch's view, wrongly oriented urban and military mobs needed a strong, opportunistic, adroit leadership. Such mobs would rebel against excellent, philosophically minded rulers who did not give them what they wanted. Dion, for example, lived in a simple and moderate way, as if he were at Plato's table, but could not please his professional officers (*Dion* 52.2-3). Very soon this Platonic reformer discovered that the mercenaries as well as the Syracusan mob were only after material gain, and were not at all interested in sound Platonic political reform. Dion could not convince them and went under (*Dion* 52-57).⁴ Marcus Brutus symbolically decorated his soldier's weapons and armour with silver and gold, but had not much money to make them rich and so had no authority to speak of over his own soldiers during the battle of Philippi (Plutarch, *Brutus* 41-42). In his series of Parallel Lives Plutarch pairs him rather ominously with Dion.⁵

How difficult it was to guide bands of soldiers is demonstrated by Plutarch in his *Caesar*. Even this great commander, an adroit military leader, who, according to Plutarch, was greatly admired by his troops (*Caesar* 16-17), came into trouble and got mutinies at his hands, when he did not fulfil material promises. In *Caesar* 51.2 Plutarch tells us that men spoke ill of Caesar because, after his soldiers had mutinied and killed two men of praetorian rank, Cosconius and Galba (what is in a name !), he censured them only so far as to call them 'citizens' instead of 'soldiers.'

Some military commanders gave in and enriched their soldiers in a shameless way, to the detriment of the regions they went through. The *locus classicus* is of course Plutarch, *Sulla* 12.6-9, where Plutarch, speaking on Sulla's campaign in Greece during the first Mithridatic War, tells us how Greek sanctuaries were shamelessly plundered to satisfy the greed of the Roman soldiers. In *Sulla* 12.8, comparing Sulla with more frugal and more disciplined generals of former generations, Plutarch observes:

The generals of this later time, however, who won their primacy by force, not merit, and who needed their armies for service against one another, rather than against the public enemy, were compelled to merge the general in the demagogue, and then, by purchasing the services of their soldiers with lavish sums to be spent on luxurious living, they unwittingly made their whole country a thing for sale, and themselves slaves of the basest men for the sake of ruling over the better (*Sulla* 12.8).

Leadership and soldiers in Plutarch's *Galba* and *Otho*

In the introduction of Plutarch's *Galba*, which may have been written earlier than the Parallel Lives,⁶ we see some Plutarchan leadership commonplaces in working order already. In the opening lines of the *Galba* Plutarch tells us:

Iphicrates the Athenian used to think that the mercenary soldier might well be fond of wealth and fond of pleasure, in order that his quest for the means to gratify his desires might lead him to fight with greater recklessness; but most people think that a body of soldiers, just like a natural body in full vigour, ought to have no initiative of its own, but should follow that of its commander. Wherefore Paullus Aemilius, as we are told, finding that the army which he had taken over in Macedonia was infected with loquacity and meddlesomeness, as though they were all generals, gave out word that each man was to have his hand ready and his sword sharp, but that he himself would look out for the rest. Moreover, Plato (*Resp.* 376c) sees that a good commander or general can do nothing unless his army is amenable and loyal; and he thinks that the quality of obedience, like the quality characteristic of a king, requires a noble nature and a philosophic training, which, above all things, blends harmoniously the qualities of gentleness and humanity with those of high courage and aggressiveness. Many dire events, and particularly

⁴ See De Blois 1978, 123-131; idem 1992, 4604-4611; idem 1997b, 209-224, esp. 216 ff.; idem 2000, 131-139, esp. 134 ff.

⁵ See De Blois 1992, 4609.

⁶ Jones 1971, 74; 79. However, one has to admit that the chronological order of Plutarch's *Lives* cannot definitely be determined; see Ziegler 1951, 708, 895 and 899-903; Scardigli 1979, 12 f.

those which befell the Romans after the death of Nero, bear witness to this, and show plainly that an empire has nothing more fearful to show than a military force given over to untrained and unreasoning impulses (Plutarch, *Galba* 1.1-3).⁷

According to Christopher Pelling, in this passage there seems to be an emphasis on the dangerous and reckless irrationality of *ordinary* soldiers when they are out of control. Rita Scuderi seems to miss this point. In a recently published article she simply speaks of the dangers coming from the armies in general.⁸

In the following chapters of this *Vita*, as well as in the subsequent *Life of Otho*, which both are - like the *Parallel Lives* - mixtures of information and opinions drawn from many quarters,⁹ Plutarch demonstrates how bad leadership at the highest levels of command caused a progressive deterioration of military discipline and a progressively worsening military misconduct. Some differences with similar stories in the *Parallel Lives* may be expected. Generally Plutarch's *Lives of the Caesars* seem to have been closer to history than the *Bioi Paralleloï*.¹⁰ In *Galba* 2.5 Plutarch says that the accurate and circumstantial narration of events belongs to formal history (Τῆς πραγματικῆς ἱστορίας), but that it is his duty not to omit such incidents as are worthy of mention in the deeds and fates of the Caesars.

In Plutarch's *Galba* the worst kind of leadership is displayed by the emperor himself and by his close assistants, men such as Vinus, Laco, and Icelus. Those second line leaders were rapacious and acted in an arbitrary, selfish, tyrannical way. In practically all literary sources Galba is reproached of giving them too much latitude,¹¹ whereas he tried to reclaim Nero's gifts from the many who had received them - except 10 %, which they were allowed to keep¹² - and to be an example of old-fashioned *severitas* towards the soldiers, even if they had more or less justified claims to make.¹³ Besides Galba punished Nero's creatures in a rather erratic way, killing some of them, but sparing the lives of the worst hoodlums, men such as Tigellinus, who had earned Vinus' friendship.¹⁴ On the other hand he organized the murder of Clodius Macer, an usurper in the province of Africa, but also of Fonteius Capito, commander of one of the Rhine armies, which may have raised suspicions among other military leaders.¹⁵

Galba repeatedly treated groups of soldiers badly, thus earning the hatred of many military men. First of all he never gave the soldiers, neither the praetorians nor the legionaries, the donatives that had been promised to them by Nymphidius Sabinus, who in this way had lured the soldiers away from their adherence to Nero, nor did he give them a more modest amount of money, which, according to Plutarch, *Galba* 18.2, would have satisfied many soldiers. Remarkably enough, Plutarch is the only one to give this essential detail. According to Plutarch, Tacitus, Suetonius and Cassius Dio, Galba stated that it was his custom to enroll soldiers, not to buy them.¹⁶ This had obviously become a famous dictum by the time they wrote their works. In his report about this issue Plutarch hardly deviates from other literary sources. Plutarch tells us that the soldiers began to cherish a dire and savage hatred towards

⁷ On this passage see for example Ash 1997, 189-214.

⁸ See C.B.R. Pelling, 'Rhetoric, *paideia* and Psychology in Plutarch's *Lives*', in Pelling 2002, 346 n. 10. Scuderi 1995, 404f.

⁹ Cf. Jones 1971, 72-80, esp. 78-80, where he speaks about the character of Plutarch's *Galba* and *Otho*.

According to Jones, the *Galba* and *Otho* are not the fruit of deep research (p. 80).

¹⁰ See Ash 1997, 190 f.; Duff 1999, 19 f.; Pelling 2002, 195 n. 68.

¹¹ See Plutarch, *Galba* 7.1; 11.1-2; 12.1-3; 17.1-5; Tacitus, *Hist.* 1.6.1; 1.7.3; 1.13.1; Suetonius, *Galba* 14.2 and 15.2; Cassius Dio 64.2.1-2.

¹² Plutarch, *Galba* 16.2-3; cf. Cassius Dio 64.3.4. Tacitus, *Hist.* 1.20.1-2 observes that most of the assessed people - obviously utter profligates - hardly had more than 10 % left.

¹³ Plutarch, *Galba* 2.1-2; 18.2; 23.2-3.

¹⁴ Plutarch, *Galba* 17.1-5.

¹⁵ Plutarch, *Galba* 15.1-2; cf. Tacitus, *Hist.* 1.7.1; Suetonius, *Galba* 15.2; Cassius Dio 64.3.3-4.

¹⁶ Plutarch, *Galba* 18.2; Tacitus, *Hist.* 1.5.2; Suetonius, *Galba* 16; Cassius Dio 64.3.3. This had obviously become a famous dictum by the time they wrote their works.

Galba, because he was defrauding them and so doing laid down instructions for succeeding emperors.¹⁷

Galba decimated fleet soldiers who had been promoted to legionary status by Nero and served in the neighbourhood of Rome. They went out to meet Galba when he was approaching Rome, and entreated him to guarantee them their new status. Plutarch tells us:

Moreover, when, in his approach to the city, he (= Galba) was distant from it about five-and-twenty furlongs, he fell in with a disorderly and tumultuous crowd of seamen, who beset his way and encompassed him on all sides. These were men whom Nero had formed into a legion and given the title of soldiers (*στρατιώτας*). And now they were there to enforce their just rights as soldiers, and would not suffer the emperor to be seen or heard by those who came to meet him, but with tumultuous shouts demanded standards for their legion and regular quarters. When Galba put off their demand and told them to renew it another time, they declared that the postponement was merely a way of refusing their demands, and were incensed, and followed along with unremitting shouts. Some actually drew their swords, and then Galba ordered his horsemen to charge upon them (Plutarch, *Galba* 15.3-4).

This led to a massacre among the fleet soldiers. Tacitus, *Hist.* 1.6.1. and Suetonius, *Galba* 12.2 give similar stories. Suetonius tells us that Galba dispersed the fleet soldiers by a cavalry charge and had them decimated subsequently. In the same paragraph Suetonius narrates that Galba also disbanded a cohort of Germans, whom the previous Caesars had made their bodyguard and had found absolutely faithful in many emergencies.¹⁸ Cassius Dio tells a comparable story about Nero's bodyguards, and rather contentedly observes that Galba had 7000 of them killed, but Cassius Dio in all of his eighty books is virtually obsessed with the risks of military power and misconduct and is always satisfied with examples of *severitas* towards soldiers.¹⁹

Galba's worst mistakes had to do with the upper Rhine army and with the succession. First of all Galba utterly neglected the threatening situation in Germania Superior. In A.D. 68 the army of this region, under the command of Verginius Rufus, had annihilated the forces of the Gallic usurper Vindex, with whom Galba had sympathized. Verginius and his army had stood by their oaths of loyalty towards the reigning emperor Nero.²⁰ On top of the grievances that were common among all armies, such as annoyance about the emperor's unwarranted meanness and vexation about the behaviour of his assistants, the army of the upper Rhine felt defrauded of the reward for its services against the Gauls and Vindex, saw its victorious commander Verginius Rufus disappear in a rather dishonourable way, and loathed its new commander Hordeonius Flaccus. Besides the soldiers of this army now saw that their enemies of a year before, Vindex' Gauls, were honoured by Galba, Vindex' former ally, for example through grants of citizenship.²¹ Coins issued in A.D. 68, bearing the legend *Concordia Hispaniarum et Galliarum* on the obverse and the words *Victoria p.R.* on the reverse, seem to suggest that the annoyance of the upper Rhine soldiers was not out of place. This had been Vindex' hope.²²

Secondly Galba selected the wrong person to succeed him. As soon as he had heard about the rebellious attitude of the army of the upper Rhine Galba, who was childless and thought that the concomitant lack of dynastic continuity undermined his position, decided to adopt a successor. Instead of opting for someone who was popular among the soldiery and was an experienced administrator, for example Otho, he chose Piso, a man of an impeccable lineage

¹⁷ Plutarch, *Galba* 18.2.

¹⁸ Suetonius, *Galba* 12.2.

¹⁹ Cassius Dio 64.3.1-2. On Cassius Dio's views of the soldiery see De Blois 1997a, 2650-2676; idem 1998-1999, 275 ff.

²⁰ See Wiedemann in *CAH X²*, 1996, 256 ff.

²¹ Plutarch, *Galba* 22.1-2; Tacitus, *Hist.* 1.51 ff.; Suetonius, *Galba* 16.2.

²² See McCrum & Woodhead 1966, 36, nr. 26.

and of a reputedly even more impeccable character, but a nonentity in politics and among the armies. To make things worse, Galba even at this occasion refused to give the soldiers a handsome donative. As a matter of fact these two blunders immediately led to Otho's coup and the demise of Galba.²³ The latter now also lost the support of much of the middle cadre of the praetorian guard. In *Galba* 24.1 Plutarch describes how middle cadre officers who had gone over to Otho, together with one of the latter's freedmen, corrupted groups of soldiers with money and material promises. Suetonius does not mention such activities by military middle cadres, but Tacitus does,²⁴ so Plutarch does not give us complete fiction here. Like Plutarch, Tacitus is positive about Piso's character and ethics, and he shows, like Suetonius does, that his adoption by Galba triggered Otho's usurpation.²⁵

Otho was not really a better leader than Galba had been. In *Otho* 3.2-6 Plutarch tells us that Otho was placing his government on a sound basis and took a number of wise decisions, but that the paid soldiers (*misthophoroi*) made themselves troublesome by urging him not to trust the influential citizens. Besides they started to behave in a disorderly way. In *Otho* 5.3 Plutarch speaks of the disorderly and arrogant spirit of the soldiers, their *ataxia* and *thrasutès*. Otho did not behave as a good, strong leader would have done, and did not overcome these problems. His best act seems to have been his impressive suicide.²⁶

At the second level of command there was bad leadership as well. Vinius, Laco, Icelus and Nymphidius Sabinus were mentioned already. But also outside Rome, at the upper Rhine, leadership was not what it should have been. In *Galba* 10.1-2 Plutarch tells us that Galba was anxious about the attitude of Verginius Rufus, who was commanding a large and efficient army and had the added prestige of his victory. After Nero's demise Verginius' soldiers wanted him to be their emperor, but he did not give in to their wishes. In *Galba* 10.3 Plutarch says:

But after Fabius Valens, commander of a legion, had led off in taking the oath of allegiance to Galba, and letters had come from Rome telling of the senate's decrees (*i.e.* to make Galba emperor), he succeeded at last, though with the greatest difficulty, in persuading his soldiers to declare Galba emperor; and when Galba sent Flaccus Hordeonius to succeed him, Verginius received that officer and handed over his army to him.

The highest leader, Verginius, is hesitating and does not really take firm decisions at the right moments, in this way giving the soldiery too much latitude, and so a leader of the second rank, Valens, has a hard time to get things right. Verginius' behaviour is also described by other literary sources.²⁷ In the Verginius story leadership comes off much worse than the soldiers, who stick to their oaths and only begin to think about a new emperor when it has become clear that Nero is no longer their ruler. Plutarch does not deviate from historical tradition, in order to depict the soldiers more negatively than they would have deserved.

Verginius' successor in Germania Superior, Hordeonius Flaccus, is also depicted as a weak leader: too old and too sick. Without the backing of his authority, his officers – in this case military tribunes and centurions, *i.e.* third rank leaders – could not appease their soldiers, when the latter were demanding the donative that had been promised to them.²⁸ In *Galba* 18.4 Plutarch tells us:

²³ On Piso's adoption and its consequences see Plutarch, *Galba* 23-25; Tacitus, *Hist.* 1.12-20; 21-43; Suetonius, *Galba* 17-20; Suetonius, *Otho* 5.1; Cassius Dio 64.5.1 ff.

²⁴ *Hist.* 1.24-25.

²⁵ Tacitus, *Hist.* 1.13-20.

²⁶ On Otho's reign see Plutarch, *Otho* 1-18; Tacitus, *Hist.* 1.44-47; 71-90; 2. 11-56; Suetonius, *Otho* 7-12; Cassius Dio 64.7-15. On Otho's suicide see Plutarch, *Otho* 16-18; Tacitus, *Hist.* 2.48-49; Suetonius, *Otho* 10-11; Cassius Dio 64.13-15.

²⁷ Tacitus, *Hist.* 1.8.2; Cassius Dio 63.25.1-3; 27.1. In 63.1 he calls Verginius an energetic man. He comes off better in Dio's report than in Plutarch's.

²⁸ Tacitus, *Hist.* 1.9.1; Plutarch, *Galba* 18.1-4. Cf. Suetonius, *Galba* 16.

Of Flaccus himself, who was physically incapacitated by an acute gout, and inexperienced in the conduct of affairs, they (*i.e.* the soldiers of Flaccus' army) made no account whatever. And once at a spectacle, when the military tribunes and centurions, after the Roman custom, invoked health and happiness upon the emperor Galba, the mass of the soldiery raised a storm of dissent at first, and then, when the officers persisted in their invocation, cried out in response, "if he deserves it".

According to Plutarch, *Galba* 22-23, the behaviour of the soldiers of the upper Rhine army escalated to unmanageable heights at the beginning of the new year, A.D. 69. At the Calends of January they refused to take the customary oath to the emperor, overturned Galba's statues and swore allegiance to the senate and the people of Rome. Plutarch tells us that then their officers – the third line of leadership, which had been positively loyal and effectively leading the troops so far – began to fear that their lawless spirit (*ἀφάνεια*) might issue in revolt and started to go along with the soldiers. In the end this resulted in usurpation of the imperial purple by Vitellius. Thus bad leadership at top levels resulted in an escalation of military misbehaviour and in outright usurpation. Third level leaders could no longer repair things.

In Plutarch's *Galba* and *Otho* the praetorians in Rome became – in reaction to bad leadership at the top and at the second level – ever more unruly as well. In *Galba* 2.1 they are still fairly loyal to their master, Nero. Their commander, Nymphidius Sabinus, who is depicted as a very bad character and a depraved leader, has to convince them to opt for Galba and act against their oath. He promises the soldiers a impossibly high donative. Plutarch observes:

It was Nymphidius Sabinus, prefect of the court guard along with Tigellinus Who, when Nero's case was altogether desperate, and it was clear that he was going to run away to Egypt, persuaded (*ἔπεισε*) the soldiery, as though Nero were no longer there but had already fled, to proclaim Galba emperor, and promised as largess seventy-five hundred drachmas²⁹ apiece for the court, or praetorian, guards, as they were called, and twelve hundred and fifty drachmas for those in service outside of Rome, a sum which it was impossible to raise without inflicting ten thousand times more evils upon the world than those inflicted by Nero. This promise was at once the death of Nero, and soon afterwards of Galba: the one the soldiers to his fate in order to get their reward, the other they killed because they did not get it (Plutarch, *Galba* 2-3).

At first sight this passage seems to give us a fine example of *avaritia militum*, in accordance with the introductory chapter of Plutarch's *Galba*, but the soldiers do not make their choice of their own initiative. They are fairly loyal to their oaths and are only led on by bad leaders, as is also described by other literary sources.³⁰

After Galba had become emperor and had come to Rome the praetorians started to have second thoughts about this ruler, because of his meanness, his uncalled for severity towards the military - whereas he was lenient towards many other people who did not deserve such treatment - and the behaviour of his assistants. Their commander Nymphidius Sabinus, who was very much disappointed by Galba's appointment policies and had begun to think that Galba was about to eliminate him, was already trying to become emperor himself. He seemed to be successful in stirring up his troops, and the praetorians were already wavering in their loyalty to Galba, when - according to Plutarch, *Galba* 14.1-3 - a third rank leader, the military tribune Antonius Honoratus, appeased the angry praetorians, which may be interpreted as a sign of failing leadership at higher levels. Honoratus rebuked the praetorians because they were on the verge of betraying one emperor after the other, Galba after Nero, and were breaking their oaths of allegiance in rapid succession. He was successful, as the usurper Nymphidius Sabinus, the praetorian prefect, soon discovered to his misery.³¹ In this passage the soldiers are not utterly depraved, but accessible to morally sound reasoning, even if it

²⁹ Amounting to about 7500 *denarii*.

³⁰ See Tacitus, *Hist.* 1.5.1: ... *arte magis et impulsu quam suo ingenio tractus ad destituendum Neronem.*

³¹ Plutarch, *Galba* 14.1-6.

comes from a lower officer who lacks the support of his commander. However, the danger was not gone. As Plutarch observes,

the agitation at Rome was still smouldering, and at the same time a certain respect for Galba's presence blunted and delayed the spirit of revolution, and the absence of any manifest occasion for a change repressed and kept under cover, somehow or other, the resentment of the soldiers (*Galba* 18.3).

Their resentment against the emperor rose explicitly to the point of violence and rebellion when Galba adopted Piso instead of anyone who was trusted by the soldiers of the guard, and when the military middle cadre began to waver in its loyalty towards Galba (Plutarch, *Galba* 24.1). Instrumental in this change for the worse must have been an essential detail that Plutarch leaves out. He does not mention that Galba caused some panic among the praetorians by discharging many of them, from time to time in small groups, as under suspicion of being partisans of Nymphidius Sabinus. Galba also discharged military tribunes, not only from the guard, but also from other military units.³² A bad mistake. Any usurper, eventually Otho as well as Vitellius, could now find adherents among the military middle cadre.

The worst was still to come. In *Otho* 3.3-6 Plutarch tells us that in Rome soldiers of the praetorian guard became suspicious when they noticed that weapons were loaded on waggons, (probably to equip soldiers who had to participate in the war against the Vitellians, LdB). Some attacked the waggons, others killed two centurions who opposed them, as well as Crispinus, the responsible higher officer. Plutarch continues:

Then the whole body, putting themselves in array and exhorting one another to go to the help of the emperor, marched to Rome. Here, learning that eighty senators were at supper with Otho, they rushed to the palace, declaring that now was a good time to take off all the emperor's enemies at one stroke. Accordingly, the city was in great commotion, expecting to be plundered at once; in the palace there were runnings to and fro; and a dire perplexity fell upon Otho. For while he had fears about the safety of his guests, he himself was an object of fear to them, and he saw that they kept their eyes fixed upon him in speechless terror, some of them having even brought their wives with them to the supper. But he sent the prefects of the guard with orders to explain matters to the soldiers and appease them, while at the same time he dismissed his guests by another door; and they barely made their escape as the soldiers, forcing their way through the guards into the great hall, asked what was become of the enemies of Caesar. In this crisis, then, Otho stood up on his couch, and after many exhortations, and entreaties, and not without plentiful tears, at last succeeded in sending them away (Plutarch, *Galba* 3.4-7).

The end of authority and discipline and the utter escalation of military anarchy, and the nadir of bad leadership at the top, by Otho, in accordance with the 'model' given in *Galba* 1. Other writers, such as Tacitus and Cassius Dio, also tell us about this event, but Plutarch is the author who is giving us a clue about the actual cause of the trouble: suspicion among praetorian soldiers that the weapons that were being loaded upon waggons would be used against the emperor. This essential detail makes the story more comprehensible.

Conclusion

In conclusion. According to Plutarch, neither Galba, nor Otho, nor Galba's assistants, nor Nymphidius or Flaccus were leaders who could react in an adroit, efficacious way to justified complaints and grievances of the praetorians and other soldiers, or to escalated military greed and misbehaviour, and so the worst case scenario developed. Plutarch describes their failure in a clever way, showing the escalation of military misconduct, which unfolded over time as a consequence of bad leadership at the top and the second level of command. Every now and then he shows that officers of the third level of command had to fill the gap, but were no

³² Tacitus, *Hist.* 1.20.3 tells us that quite a few military tribunes were discharged, which caused fright and annoyance among other military men. Cf. Suetonius, *Galba* 16.1.

longer capable of doing so when the soldiery became ever more frustrated and angry. Plutarch integrated his 'model' of escalating military misbehaviour as a function and result of bad leadership very well with historical *fundamenta* that he must have borrowed from his sources.³³ Plutarch's versions are elaborate and full of essential details, such as names and ranks, which shows that he respected the information that he got from them, and Plutarch's versions hardly deviates from those given by other literary sources. In his *Galba* and *Otho* he is close to history and historiography. The interaction between bad leadership and an escalation of military misbehaviour may be a historical phenomenon, more than a Plutarchan invention.

Nijmegen, July 2007.



³³ The term *fundamenta* was borrowed from Cicero, *De oratore* 2 (15) 63.

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