



## [Tacitus, Histories I.16](#)

The adoption of Lucius Calpurnius Piso Frugi Licinianus by Galba in January 69 CE

**Name of the author:** Tacitus

**Date:** 103 CE to 104 CE

**Place:** Rome

**Language:** Latin

**Category:** Roman

**Literary genre:** History

**Title of work:** Histories

**Reference:** I.16

**Commentary:**

After having fulfilled a governorship in a consular province, either Upper or Lower Germania (between 101 and 104 CE), Tacitus went back to Rome and started to write the *Histories*. This work came after the *Agricola*, the *Germania* and his oratorical treatise, the *Dialogue on Oratory*. The *Histories* would have been completed around 110 CE, and the first three books by 103 or 104 CE (Sage, "Tacitus'," p. 863; for a presentation of Tacitus's life see [Tacitus, Agricola XXI](#)). In the *Histories*, Tacitus deals with the most recent period, that is from 69 to 96 CE. Most of the work has been lost as on the probable twelve books that composed it, only the books one to four and the first third of the fifth book have been preserved.

On the 9<sup>th</sup> (or possibly the 11<sup>th</sup>) of June 68 CE, the Senate recognised Nero as a public enemy, a decision that led Nero to commit suicide. In parallel, Galba, the former legate of Hispania Citerior that previously revolted against Nero, was acclaimed as Augustus and was granted imperial powers. Then, with the exception of Africa held by Clodius Macer, all the legates in the provinces recognized Galba as emperor. However, Galba faced a problem of legitimacy. If Tiberius, Caligula or Nero were part of the Julio-Claudian family and could use the argument that they were legitimate heirs, Galba's connection with the Julio-Claudians was very remote. The only connection he could claim was the fact that he had been adopted by the second wife of his father, Livia Ocellina, who was a very distant relative of the empress Livia (see Suetonius, *Galba* IV; Lindsay, *Adoption*, p. 90). During his reign, Galba maintained the memory of his distant kinship with the former empress (the effigy of the empress Livia appears on many of his coins; see Wiedemann, "From Nero," p. 261). When he arrived in Rome with his entourage, especially with the former legate of Lusitania Marcus Salvius Otho, Galba ordered that many former supporters of Nero who could become dangerous rivals had to be killed. In addition, Galba undertook a strict financial policy which consisted in going back on Nero's previous costly projects and favours. All these measures resulted in Galba losing a great deal of sympathy and support during the very first months of his reign (see Wiedemann, "From Nero," p. 256-265).

On the 1<sup>st</sup> of January 69 CE, the legions of Upper Germania proclaimed emperor their commander Aulus Vitellius. At the same time, Galba announced that he had chosen the man he wanted to adopt to be his successor to the throne: Lucius Calpurnius Piso Frugi Licinianus, the youngest son of the consul of 27 CE. Lucius Calpurnius Piso Frugi Licinianus was the brother of Cnaeus Pompeius Magnus who married Antonia, the daughter of the emperor Claudius. In addition, through his mother Scribonia, Piso had distant connections with the Julian family. In spite of this prestigious familial background, Lucius Calpurnius Piso Frugi Licinianus did not have political ambitions. Galba's choice was thus surprising, especially when one considers that Galba had a grand-nephew, Publius Dolabella, who could have fitted the purpose. Galba's choice has to be interpreted as a subterfuge to avoid being confronted with the man who was considered as his logical successor: Otho (see Wiedemann, "From Nero," p. 264-265). On the 10<sup>th</sup> of January, Galba announced to his council *consilium*, then to the praetorians and to the Senate, his decision to make Piso his successor to the throne. As Thomas Wiedemann rightly says: "The adoption of Piso was not so much a matter of indicating who was to be the next emperor, as indicating who was not: Otho" (see Wiedemann, "From Nero," p. 267).

The text presented here is part of the invented speech that Tacitus puts in the mouth of Galba when he announced his decision to adopt Piso, in what Tacitus ironically calls *comitia imperii*, "the comices of the Empire" (I.14.1). These *comitia* appear as some kind of imperial council reduced to four persons. It is interesting to note that this speech before this small assembly is not mentioned in either Suetonius's or Plutarch's life of Galba (in Plutarch, *Life of Galba* XXIII.2, as in Suetonius, *Galba* XVII, Piso is proclaimed Caesar before the camp of the praetorians). Before analysing the text itself, it is important to recall that, since the testamentary adoption of Octavian by Caesar, the transmission of the political and hence imperial power was bound up with filiation (see



Corbier, "Male Power," p. 190). *Adoptio/adrogatio* was used in the Julio-Claudian family as one of the legal means which enabled to "promote preferred heirs within the lineage" (Lindsay, *Adoption*, p. 171). We can thus quote the *adrogatio* of Tiberius by his step-father Augustus on the 26<sup>th</sup> of June 4 CE (see [Velleius Paterculus, The Roman History II.103](#)), or that of Nero by Claudius on the 25<sup>th</sup> of February 50 CE. The main difference between these previous *adrogationes* and that of Piso by Galba was that there was no kinship ties between the two men. By then, in the speech presented in Tacitus's *Histories* I.15-16, Galba wants to convince his audience about the soundness of political adoptions not determined or based on hereditary rules. However, it seems obvious that when he narrated this episode, Tacitus must have had in mind more recent events: Nerva's claim to reconcile *libertas* with the Principate, and the adoption of Trajan by Nerva in 97 CE (see Syme, *Tacitus*, p. 206-207).

In the preceding passage, not reproduced here, Galba's speech starts with a sentence, "If I were adopting you as a private citizen by a *lex curiata* in the presence of the pontiffs as is customary, it would be an honour for me to introduce into my family a descendant of Cnaeus Pompey..." (I.15.1), which raises the question of the procedure followed for Piso's adoption. In the previous sentence, Galba recalls the traditional procedure that he would have followed if he had adopted Piso as a private citizen (adoption which would have been made possible by the consent of the pontiffs and by a vote of the curiate assembly). However, as emperor, he assumes the responsibility of adopting his successor privately out of the usual procedure that had been however respected for Augustus's or Claudius's adoptions of Tiberius and Nero (see Wuilleumier, Le Bonniec and Hellegouarc'h, *Tacite*, p. 127, n. 4; Levene, "Speeches," p. 216-217). This point appears then to contradict the leitmotiv of Galba's speech: "Augustus looked for a successor within his own house (*in domo*), I [i.e. Galba] in the whole state (*in re publica*)" (I.15.2). As recalled by David Levene about this leitmotiv: "Yet that format and subject matter seem out of keeping with the privacy and informality of its occasion and audience" (Levene, "Speeches," p. 217). Then, Galba enumerates the reasons why Piso would be the best candidate, and warns him against the dangers of flattery (I.15.3-4). In the second part of his speech (I.16, that is the text presented here), Galba presents arguments to justify his stance according to which the stability of the Empire is best preserved with the adoption of an outsider candidate who distinguished himself by his merits rather than by his birth. He develops this stance through various arguments.

First, Galba implies that the choice of a "good successor" (*bonum successorem*, 16.1) is the best solution that he could find to work for the stability of the Empire. This idea is asserted at the very beginning of the text presented here, when Galba implies that in order to keep the "huge body of the Empire keep its balance (*stare as librari*)" he had no choice but to make sure that it will remain forever led by a *rector*, a "ruler" (16.1). Galba comes back on that issue at the end of his speech, especially when he compares the context in which he was proclaimed emperor and the one in which Piso is adopted. The two legions which are "not yet reduced to quiet" (16.3) are clearly the legions IV Macedonia and XII Primigenia in Upper Germania that recently revolted. To reassure Piso, Galba says that he himself "did not come to the throne in security (*ad securas res*)," and implies that, by resolving his problem of legitimacy, Piso's *adrogatio* will work for the reinstatement of political stability in the Empire.

Second, Galba tries to justify the fact that an adoption not based on kinship connections is the best solution to find the *optimus princeps*. In that perspective, Galba says: "...and since the houses of the Julii and the Claudii are ended, adoption will select only the best (*optimum quemque adoptio inveniet*)..." (16.1). He then goes further in his plea in favour of adoption by writing that "to be begotten and born of princes is mere chance (*fortuitum*)" (16.2). Political adoption of a successor which would have been chosen for his merits and not for his birth is presented by Galba as largely preferable as it is an "unhampered judgment" (*iudicium integrum*, 16.2).

The reflexion that Tacitus gives through the voice of Galba on the superiority of a political adoption based on a free choice of the best *princeps* has to be read in relation with the recent adoption of Trajan by Nerva in 97 CE. Galba's plea in favour of political adoption clearly echoes motifs that appear for instance in chapter 7 of the *Panegyric of Trajan* written by Pliny the Younger. The fact that the first three books of the *Histories* and the *Panegyric of Trajan* were composed nearly at the same time – the later being recited in its first version in 100 CE and reworked for publication in the following years –, leaves the question of which of the two would have influenced the other uncertain (the priority of Tacitus's narrative has been suggested in Sage, "Tacitus' Historical Works," p. 861-862; the possibility that Tacitus and Pliny may have been influenced by a third source has also been suggested, see Durry, *Pliny le Jeune*, p. 61-63). Pliny the Younger actually recalls that between the adoptee and the adopter there was "no tie of kinship or relationship (*nulla congnatio, nulla necessitudo*)" and that "your only bond was that of being both excellent (*uterque optimus*), and that you were worthy either to chose or to be chosen" (VII.7.4). Pliny then suggests that in order to choose the *optimus princeps* it is highly preferable to search among all the citizens rather than only into one's own house (VII.7.6). Even if the echoes between these two sources are obvious, it seems that Pliny the Younger's perspective is much more optimistic than that of Tacitus. Actually, if Pliny implies that Trajan's adoption saved Nerva, at the end of Galba's speech, the Romans are presented as unable to enjoy entire liberty



any longer, being thus obliged to trust their *rector*. However, as highlighted by Tacitus, the problem was that all the *rectores* did not reveal themselves worthy of ruling the Empire. For Tacitus, Galba was one of them: "He [i.e. Galba] seemed to be superior to private condition so long as he was a private man, and all would have agreed that he was worthy of Empire if he had never held it" (I.49.4; about Tacitus's feelings towards Galba, see Syme, *Tacitus*, p. 204-205).

The other argument given by Galba to defend the idea that political adoptions not based on kinship connections are the best solution is that, being determined by a choice and not by hazard, they embody true liberty: "... the fact that we emperors are now beginning to be chosen will be for all a kind of liberty (*libertatis*)..." (16.1); "... but the judgment displayed in adoption is unhampered (*iudicium integrum*); and, if one wishes to make a choice (*eligere*), common consent (*consensus*) points out the individual" (16.2). The idea expressed in the second quotation that the adoptee who is supposed to become the successor of the ruling emperor had to be supported by all men, or even gods, appears also in the *Panegyric of Trajan* (Pliny the Younger, *Panegyric of Trajan* VIII.1; X.2). This idea that the adoption of the future emperor is the result of the *consensus* of all the men of the Empire fits in with the ideological postulate, coming back to the very beginning of the principate, according to which the emperor owed his power to the *consensus universorum*, that is to the unanimous consent of all men (see *Res Gestae* XXXIV). However, Galba's reference to the ideal *consensus* going hand in hand with the political adoption of the worthiest candidate is put into perspective when he later recognizes that he himself had been called to power "by war and men's judgment of our worth" (16.3) (see Wuilleumier, Le Bonniec and Hellegouarc'h, *Tacite*, p. 128, n. 7; Damon, *Tacitus*, p. 137). Finally, by presenting political adoptions not based on kinship ties as the best solution because they embody *libertas*, Tacitus proposes a wider reflection on the limits of the Principate. It is important to recall that most of Tacitus's works are pervaded by the dichotomy between freedom (*libertas*), and enslavement or slavery (*servitus*). In addition, behind the historical narratives, Tacitus deals more or less implicitly with contemporary political issues. For example, in the case of the *Agricola*, the enslavement of the Britons under Roman mastery may echo his reflection about the reduction to servitude of many senators under Domitian (see [Tacitus, Agricola XXIX-XXXII](#)). Thus, this speech of Galba enables Tacitus to highlight some limits of the Principate, especially the fact that, when the imperial succession was determined by heredity, this regime could lead to the emergence of tyranny and tyrants such as Nero (see 16.2). Through Galba's adoption of Piso, political adoptions not based on kinship ties are presented as a procedure that could conciliate two entities which could have been antithetical in the past: namely the principate, that is the fact that the ruling of the Empire is entrusted to one *rector*, and the liberty (*libertas*). As mentioned previously, what Tacitus had in mind was more Nerva's adoption than Galba's, however. Actually, at the beginning of the *Agricola*, which he composed around five years before, Tacitus wrote that "... the emperor Nerva, from the very beginning of this happy age, has united things long incompatible, Principate and liberty (*principatum ac libertatem*)" (Tacitus, *Agricola* III). When he wrote these lines, Tacitus obviously implied that, under Domitian, the Principate had drifted toward a despotic regime. If free political adoption enabled not to be enslaved to rulers chosen by the hazard of heredity, as in monarchies (here mentioned as *ut gentibus quae regnantur*), Tacitus's Galba ends his speech by recalling to Piso that he will command "men who can endure neither complete slavery (*totam servitutem*) nor complete liberty (*totam libertatem*)" (16.4). By recalling that the Romans cannot endure either complete freedom or enslavement, Galba implies that they were made for living under the Principate, that is under a regime which was supposed to be the regime of the "middle way," based on liberty but not on licence, on discipline but not on despotism (see Syme, *Roman Revolution*, p. 516; Syme, *The Augustan Aristocracy*, p. 453).

In this fictional speech, Galba develops his plea in favour of political adoptions not based on heredity through various arguments. The first one is weak as Galba implies that the announcement of his political adoption will bring back order and stop dissidence. This argument goes with the idea that political adoptions are free choices guided by the general consensus. However, this idea is discredited by the fact that this speech is given in front of a reduced audience and not according to the procedure which had been previously respected by Augustus or Claudius. In addition, the fact that Galba admits that he accessed power because of war works again his statement. The second argument developed by Galba in favour of adoption is that, as it is based on the merits of the adoptee, it enables to choose the *optimus princeps*, the best ruler. Political adoption is thus presented by Galba as a means which could work for the restoration of the true Principate, that is of a regime harmonising *libertas* and authority. The rest of the narrative shows nonetheless that Galba's adoption was a failure. Tacitus's concluding words that it would have been better if Galba had never held the Empire are irrevocable.

Keywords in the original language:



- [adoptio](#)
- [bellum](#)
- [Claudii](#)
- [consensus](#)
- [dominus](#)
- [domus](#)
- [familia](#)
- [fortuitus](#)
- [gens](#)
- [hereditas](#)
- [immanitas](#)
- [imperium](#)
- [iudicium](#)
- [Iulii](#)
- [iuventa](#)
- [libertas](#)
- [nascor](#)
- [Nero](#)
- [populus romanus](#)
- [princeps](#)
- [rector](#)
- [regnor](#)
- [res publica](#)
- [securus](#)
- [senectus](#)
- [senex](#)
- [servitus](#)
- [servus](#)
- [successor](#)

Thematic keywords in English:

- [adoption](#)
- [Galba](#)
- [kinship](#)
- [legitimacy](#)
- [liberty](#)
- [lineage](#)
- [merit](#)
- [peace](#)
- [principate](#)
- [slavery](#)
- [stability](#)
- [succession](#)

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