

# Germani Corporis Custodes

By Michael P. Speidel, Hawaii

The emperors from Augustus to Galba entrusted their security not only to the praetorian guard but also to the *Germani corporis custodes* or *Batavi*, a cavalry guard of some five hundred or one thousand men, recruited on the banks of the Rhine. These foreigners had the double role of safeguarding the emperor's person from day to day and of serving as crack troops in crises when other units rebelled. Continuing a tradition that had come into being during the late Republic, these foreign bodyguards constituted a significant underpinning of the early principate until they were dissolved by Galba<sup>1</sup>. A recently published, valuable monograph by H. Bellen describes this unit in extenso, making full use of the epigraphic sources<sup>2</sup>. The present study intends to show that Nero's adlocutio coins, taken by Bellen to refer to the *Germani corporis custodes*, actually refer to the praetorian cohorts. For this and other reasons, the history of the *Germani corporis custodes* needs to be reconsidered in a number of points.

## 1. The Alleged Representation of the Germani on Nero's Adlocutio Coins

A sestertius of Nero, datable to A.D. 65–68, (*Fig. 1*) shows the emperor haranguing a group of three soldiers and bears the legend ADLOCVT COH<sup>3</sup>. L. Rossi, and after him Bellen, see in these soldiers *Germani corporis custodes*, for the following reasons<sup>4</sup>:

- a) The emperor has a "totem horn" in his toga that seems to be a "barbarian" emblem.
- b) The officer behind the emperor is holding a long sword with a groove along the middle of the blade: this seems to be a *spatha*, a "typical Celtic-Germanic national weapon" emphasized here to demonstrate Batavian ethnicity (the soldiers themselves, though, wear the short Roman sword, the *gladius*).
- c) The soldiers have no shield and no cuirass, and if they wear a helmet it is neither crested nor conical. They are clad instead with a tunic and a coat, and they are bearded, all of which is, on Roman reliefs, typical for auxiliaries but not for legionaries or praetorians.

<sup>1</sup> J. Harmand, *L'armée et le soldat à Rome de 107 à 50 avant notre ère* (1967) 455 ff.

<sup>2</sup> H. Bellen, *Die germanische Leibwache der römischen Kaiser des julisch-claudischen Hauses*. Akad. Wiss. u. Lit. Abhandl. d. geistes- u. sozialwiss. Kl. 1 (1981), reviewed in this volume, below, p. 118f. (C. Wells). A further inscription of the *Germani* has now been published by L. Polverini, *Il lapidario Zeri di Mentana*, 1982, p. 102f., no. 45: *Vetus, Neronis Claud(i) Caesar(is) Aug(usti) corp(or)is cus(tos), n[at]atione] Ba[taus...]*.

<sup>3</sup> BMC I 260,304 (pl. 45,18); RIC 149f. 61–72; for a significant variant see BMC I 218,122 (pl. 41,5) = Bellen Fig. 20.

<sup>4</sup> L. Rossi, *La guardia pretoriana e germanica nella monetazione Giulio-Clauda*. *Elementi storici ed archeologici per una nuova interpretazione*. Riv. Ital. Num. e Science affini 69, 1967, 15 ff.; Bellen, op. cit. (note 2) 50 ff.



Fig. 1. Adlocutio sestertius of Nero. Hirmer Fotoarchiv, Archiv nr. 2005.871R.

- d) One of the soldiers has his hand raised in acclaim towards the emperor, a gesture which Roman soldiers are not found making in representations of *adlocutiones*.
- e) The standards held by the soldiers remind one of auxiliary, not praetorian or legionary standards, in so far as the crowns along the shaft are at a certain distance from each other.

Comparing Nero's *adlocutio* coin with that of Caligula (Fig. 2)<sup>5</sup> and with scene LXXVII of Trajan's Column (Fig. 3), one may question these observations. Caligula's coin shows the emperor in a stance very similar to that of Nero: a comparison of their togas leaves no doubt that the otherwise undocumented "totem horn" is but the fold of Nero's toga. Similarly, the "long, Celtic sword with a groove along the middle" held by the officer behind the emperor on the dais is no sword at all but the edge of his garment — our Fig. 1 shows clearly what is meant. The officer may indeed be holding a sword in his fist (more likely, a *rotulus*), but if so, its sheath is hidden under his garment; certainly, to judge from the position of his hand, a sword would have to extend much farther back than either edge of his garment. Besides, it would be ironical if the designer of the coin wanted to express the "Celtic-Germanic" ethnicity of the soldiers by the long sword of the officer while giving the soldiers themselves the short, Roman *gladius*. It seems obvious, then, that the officer behind the emperor is one of the praetorian prefects.

<sup>5</sup> BMC I 157,68 (pl. 29,12); Bellen, Fig. 21; Rossi, Fig. 1; Bellen's photographs are far superior to those of Rossi.



Fig. 2. Adlocutio sestertius of Caligula. Hirmer Fotoarchiv, Archiv nr. 2003.032R.

The other arguments for *Germani* on this coin are equally unfounded. Roman soldiers listening to an *adlocutio* are portrayed on scene LXXVII of Trajan's Column (Fig. 3) without shields, helmets, or cuirasses, yet bearded and with arms raised. Their eagle standard nevertheless identifies them as legionaries<sup>6</sup>. Like the *adlocutio* coins, Trajan's Column shows some *adlocutio* scenes with soldiers wearing arms and armor and other such scenes with soldiers wearing the more peaceful camp dress. That there existed variations in dress for praetorian *adlocutiones* is known from the famous *adlocutio* of Septimius Severus to Pertinax' praetorian guard, for which the men were ordered to appear without armor (εἰρηνικῷ σχήματι, Herodian 2,13,2).

The cloak which the soldiers on Nero's coin are wearing is the *paenula*, a poncho-like, knee-length garment with a triangular cut-out in front so that its ends are pointed. It was the standard camp dress of the praetorians (Fig. 4)<sup>7</sup>,

<sup>6</sup> F. B. Florescu, Die Trajanssäule (1969) pl. 65; C. Cichorius, Die Reliefs der Traianssäule II (1896) 368 assumes the men to be auxiliaries because of their dress, but what else would a legionary wear in peacetime when he is not wearing a cuirass? – Most of the plates in M. Durry, Les cohortes prétoriennes (1938) show bearded praetorians.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. 209; Suetonius, Nero 49. – Our Fig. 4 is Vaticano, Galleria Lapidaria inv. 9330; see W. Helbig, Führer durch die öffentlichen Sammlungen klassischer Altertümer I (1963) 296 f. Nr. 391.



Fig. 3. Adlocutio. Trajan's Column, scene LXXVII. Foto Deutsches Archäologisches Institut Rom, Inst. Neg. 57.901.

rather than that of “a group of obviously non-Roman troops, in distinctive pointed cloaks . . . easily . . . identified as the *corporis custodes*”<sup>8</sup>.

Finally, the distance between the crowns on the standards is the same on the coins of both Nero and Caligula (Fig. 1 ; 2), and it is generally accepted that the latter coin refers to the praetorians<sup>9</sup>. Coins are not a source to be trusted for the details of military standards as their frame is too small for accuracy<sup>10</sup>, but if anything may be inferred from the standards on Nero's *adlocutio* sestertius, it is

<sup>8</sup> Thus L. J. F. Keppie, *Journal Roman Stud.* 72, 1982, 187, jubilantly agreeing with Bellen.

<sup>9</sup> Bellen, *op. cit.* (note 2) 122; *ibid.* 52 makes the additional point that the soldiers on Nero's coin are particularly tall, but their relation to the emperor in size is exactly the same as that of Galba's soldiers to their emperor on Galba's *adlocutio* coin (*ibid.* Fig. 22). Hence there is no need to assume that Nero's soldiers were *Germani*.

<sup>10</sup> A. v. Domaszewski, *Die Fahnen im römischen Heere*, *Abhandl. arch.-epigr. Seminar Univ. Wien* 5, 1885, 1 ff. (= *Aufsätze zur römischen Heeresgeschichte* [1972]) esp. p. 28: *Die Münzbilder* — bei der Kleinheit der Darstellungen sind die Details oft vernachlässigt; M. Durry, *op. cit.* (note 6) 197: “il semble que le graveur n'ait eu aucun souci de précision.”



Fig. 4. Gravestone of a praetorian, Rome. Foto Musei Vaticani, Archivio Fotografico N°. VII.32.1

that these standards must be praetorian rather than auxiliary because they show such an unusual number of crowns<sup>11</sup> (compare *Fig. 4*).

The inevitable conclusion, then, is that Nero's *adlocutio* coin, bearing the same legend as Caligula's, refers to the praetorian cohorts and not to the *Germani corporis custodes*. As a consequence, any conclusions drawn from the alleged representation of the *Germani corporis custodes* are invalid, such as the presumed reward of the *Germani* for their part in the Pisonian conspiracy, their "paramilitary" character, the buildings in their camp, and their "complete" assimilation to the praetorian cohorts<sup>12</sup>. In particular, the title of their unit must now be called into question.

## 2. The Title of the Unit

On their tombstones the *Germani corporis custodes* mention no specific unit title. They call themselves simply *Germanus* or *corporis custos* or *Germanus corporis custos*<sup>13</sup>. Two monuments mention a *decurio Germanorum* thereby implying that the unit's name was *Germani*. This is in keeping with the nomenclature of the "irregular" units of the principate: they might be called by their ethnic name, e.g. *Brittones*, or by their function, e.g. *Gaesati*, or both, e.g. *Raeti Gaesati*<sup>14</sup>. "Irregular" units could also use the title *numerus*, but they frequently omitted it, especially during the earlier period<sup>15</sup>.

The literary sources for the *Germani corporis custodes* largely agree with this:

Tacitus, Ann. I 24: *additur magna pars praetoriani equitis et robora Germanorum qui tum custodes imperatori aderant.*

Tacitus, Ann. 13,18: *cognitum id Neroni, excubiasque militares quae ut coniugi imperatoris olim, tum ut matri servabantur, et Germanos nuper eundem <in> honorem custodes additos digredi iubet.*

Tacitus, Ann. 15,58: *pedites equitesque, permixti Germanis, quibus fidebat princeps quasi externis.*

<sup>11</sup> For praetorian standards see Domaszewski, op. cit. 56ff.; Durry, op. cit. (note 6) 195ff.; Domaszewski, op. cit. 67: "Die Blätterkränze sind für das Prätorianersignum ebenso charakteristisch, wie die *Phalerae* für das Legionssignum. Man wird in diesem Blätterkranze die *corona aurea* erkennen dürfen."

<sup>12</sup> Bellen, op. cit. (note 2) 89; 52; 56 f.; 101.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. 105 ff.; *Germanus corporis custos*: CIL VI 4340 = Bellen, op. cit. (note 2) 115 B 2, and CIL VI 8802 = JLS 1729 = Bellen, ibid. 117 A 17. In the latter inscription the expansion *Ger(manus)* is preferable to Bellen's *Ger(manici)*, see RE IV 2, 1900, 30 s.v. *custodes corporis* (J. B. Keune).

<sup>14</sup> *Decurio Germanorum*: CIL VI 8811 = JLS 1731 = Bellen, ibid. 113 f. A 23, and CIL VI 4345 = JLS 1723 = Bellen, ibid. 115 B 3, *Brittones*: CIL XIII 6622, *Gaesati*: CIL XIII 3593, *Raeti Gaesati*: R. G. Collingwood u. R. P. Wright, *The Roman Inscriptions of Britain I* (1965) 1235; 2117.

<sup>15</sup> H. Callies, *Die fremden Truppen im römischen Heer des Prinzipats und die sogenannten nationalen Numeri*. Ber. RGK 45, 1964, 130 ff. esp. 181 ff. — M. Speidel, *Guards of the Roman Armies*. *Antiquitas* 1,28 (1978) 22 ff. Among the *singulares* no difference over time is noticeable but Callies observed such a difference elsewhere.

Suetonius, Aug. 49,1: *dimissa Calagurritanorum manu, quam usque ad devictum Antonium, item Germanorum, quam usque ad cladem Varianam inter armigeros circa se habuerat.*

Suetonius, Cal. 43: *admonitus de supplendo numero Batavorum quos circa se habebat, expeditionis Germanicae impetum cepit.*

Suetonius, Cal. 55,2: *Thr<a>eces quosdam Germanis corporis custodibus praeposuit.*

Suetonius, Cal. 58,3: *ad primum tumultum lecticari cum asseribus in auxilium accurrerunt, mox Germani corporis custodes, ac nonnullos ex percussoribus, quosdam etiam senatores innoxios interemerunt.*

Suetonius, Nero 34: [*Matrem . . .*] *mox et honore omni et potestate privavit abductaque militum et Germanorum statione.*

Suetonius, Galba 12,2: *item Germanorum cohortem a Caesaribus olim ad custodiam corporis institutam multisque experimentis fidelissimam dissolvit ac sine commodo ullo remisit in patriam, quasi Cn. Dolabellae, iuxta cuius hortos tendebat, prioniorem.*

Josephus, Antiquitates XIX 119: πρώτους δὲ εἰς τοὺς Γερμανοὺς ἡ αἴσθησις ἀφίκετο τῆς Γαίῳ τελευτῆς. δορυφόροι δ' ἦσαν οὗτοι ὁμώνυμον τῷ ἔθνει ἐφ' οὗ κατειλέχαστο Κελτικῷ τάγμα παρεχόμενοι τὸ αὐτῶν.

“The *Germani* were the first to discover the death of Gaius. They were the emperor’s body guard and provided a unit with the same name as the Celtic people from which it had been enlisted”<sup>16</sup>.

Cassius Dio 55,24: οἱ τε σωματοφύλακες μύριοι ὄντες καὶ δεκαχῆ τεταγμένοι, καὶ οἱ τῆς πόλεως φρουροὶ ἑξακισχίλιοί τε ὄντες καὶ τετραχῆ νενεμημένοι· ξένοι τε ἱππῆς ἐπίλεκτοι, οἷς τὸ τῶν Βατάουον ἀπὸ τῆς Βατάουας τῆς ἐν τῷ Ῥήνῳ νήσου ὄνομα, ὅτι δὴ κράτιστοι ἱππεύειν εἰσὶ, κεῖται· οὐ μέντοι ἀριθμὸν αὐτῶν ἀκριβῆ, ὥσπερ οὐδὲ τῶν ἀνακλήτων, εἰπεῖν δύναμαι.

“Then there were the body-guards, ten thousand in number and organized in ten divisions, and the watchmen of the city, six thousand in number and organized in four divisions; and there were also picked foreign horsemen, who were given the name of Batavians, after the island of Batavia in the Rhine, inasmuch as the Batavians are excellent horsemen. I can not, however, give their exact number any more than I can that of the *evocati*.”

Cassius Dio 61,9,1: Ἐν δὲ τινὶ θέα . . . τετρακοσίας τε ἄρκτους καὶ τριακοσίους λέοντας οἱ ἱππεῖς οἱ σωματοφύλακες τοῦ Νέρωνος κατηκόντισαν.

“In one show . . . Nero’s horseguards killed with their javelins fourhundred bears and threehundred lions.”

The bare ethnic name of the unit, *Germani*, occurs twice in Tacitus and once in Suetonius. In the Greek it occurs with Josephus, and the parallel form *Batavi* with Cassius Dio. Unlike the inscriptions, the literary sources rarely call the unit simply

<sup>16</sup> For the reading of this passage see Th. Mommsen, *Gesammelte Schr.* VI=Hist. Schr. III (1910) 18 note 1.

*corporis custodes* without the ethnic (but see Dio 61,9,1). The reason for this will be that literary sources have to create context, hence the phrase *corporis custodes* might not be informative enough, especially since the *speculatores* also guarded the imperial person<sup>17</sup>. By contrast, the composite title of the inscriptions, *Germani corporis custodes*, occurs twice in Suetonius.

As with the other “irregular” units of the principate, the title *numerus* may now be used and now dropped, since it denotes no more than “unit”, and not, as is sometimes asserted, a specific class of units as do the terms *legio*, *ala*, and *cohors*<sup>18</sup>. Hence Suetonius’ expression *numerus Batavorum* is not surprising. In fact the passage could be understood to mean “the number of the *Batavi*”. Tacitus’ term *robora Germanorum* may mean no more than *magna pars Germanorum*, being a variation on his phrase *magna pars praetoriani equitis*<sup>19</sup>. Equally devoid of technical meaning is Suetonius’ *manus Germanorum*, which suggests that there was no specific, technical title for the unit in current use.

The most remarkable description of the unit is, of course, Suetonius’ *Germanorum cohors*. H. Bellen saw in this an assimilation of the unit to a regular military cohort, and he traces this assimilation progressively from *manus* over *numerus* to *cohors*, equating the latter with Josephus’ *τάγμα*<sup>20</sup>. Now that Nero’s *adlocutio* coin can no longer be taken to confirm the title *cohors* for the *Germani*, it is possible to interpret Suetonius’ expression differently. *Cohors* – even *praetoria cohors* – may mean “guard, retinue” without any overtones of a regular regiment<sup>21</sup>. In such cases it can even denote cavalry<sup>22</sup>. This may well be the sense in which Suetonius uses the word. As a consequence, his term *cohors* need not reflect the official title of the *Germani corporis custodes*, and nothing can be learned from it as to whether they were horsemen or not. The unit’s official title, as far as we know, was simply *Germani corporis custodes*.

### 3. The Germani Corporis Custodes as Select Horsemen

Cassius Dio in the passage quoted above, describes the *Germani corporis custodes* as “picked horsemen” (ἰπιπῆς ἐπίλεκτοι). His testimony has been doubted

<sup>17</sup> Suetonius, Claudius 35: *neque convivia inire ausus est, nisi ut speculatores cum lanceis circumstarent*.

<sup>18</sup> See e.g. M. Speidel, *The Career of a Legionary*. Transactions and Proc. of the American Philol. Assoc. 112, 1982, 209 ff.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Tacitus, Annals, VI 37,1 and XII 31,4: *robur legionum*; ibid. XV 10,3: *robur equitatus*; D. Saddington, *The Roman Auxilia in Tacitus, Josephus and Other Early Imperial Writers*. Acta Classica 13, 1970, 89 ff. esp. 99.

<sup>20</sup> Bellen, op. cit. (note 2) 52.

<sup>21</sup> Durry, op. cit. (note 6) 71 ff.; ThLL s.v. *cohors*, 1559,5–9; cf. Caesar’s “praetorian cohort”, the tenth legion at Vesontio Bellum Gallicum I 40,5 and I 42,6; Harmand, op. cit. (note 1); similarly Ammianus Marcellinus 17,13 on Constantius’ *cohors praetoria*. Josephus’ *τάγμα* of course means no more than “unit” – he uses the word also for a legion (Bellum Iudaicum II,377). The specific word for *cohors* is σπεῖρα, which Josephus avoids here, cf. Plutarch, Antonius, 39.

<sup>22</sup> For a cavalry *cohors* see e.g. Vergil, Aeneid 11,500 *cohors . . . relictis ad terram defluxit equis*. Body guards of foreign rulers, whether mounted or not, are traditionally termed *cohors*, cf. ThLL s.v. *cohors* 1559, 28–70.



because he wrote some 150 years after the disappearance of the *Germani*. Some scholars, therefore, dismissing Dio's statement, preferred to see in the *Germani corporis custodes* an infantry or a mixed unit. Others considered them cavalry<sup>23</sup>. Dio, however, deserves to be taken seriously. As a senator since the time of the Antonines and also as a former governor and army commander of Pannonia, he had a keen knowledge of the Roman army. And he was a circumspect historian. His knowledge of the military institutions of Augustus tends to be better than that of his information-starved modern critics, witness the recent discovery of an inscription vindicating Dio on the number of the praetorian cohorts<sup>24</sup>. Like Suetonius, Dio calls the *Germani corporis custodes* by their more recondite name *Bataui* which shows that he used a knowledgeable source and that he did not confuse them with the *equites singulares Augusti* of his own day<sup>25</sup>. His report gains further in credibility by his refusal to give the numerical strength of the *Germani* when he cannot find a trustworthy source for it. To trust Dio, then, the *Germani corporis custodes* were a cavalry regiment.

There is nothing that conflicts with Dio's statement. The fact that some of the *Germani* dismount when they serve as the watch in the palace does not make them infantrymen any more than their successors, the *equites singulares Augusti*. Indeed, Dio's report that they were horsemen is confirmed every time we see the *Germani corporis custodes* in action. They perform as horsemen in the arena, and they appear together with the praetorian horsemen on three occasions: in Drusus' expedition to Pannonia, in Caligula's retinue in Germany, and in the mop-up during the Pisonian conspiracy<sup>26</sup>. Clearly, the *Germani corporis custodes* were horsemen.

The other part of Dio's statement is also worth some attention: the *Germani* were picked. Picked from what? The later *equites singulares Augusti* were picked

<sup>23</sup> Infantry: Keune, op. cit. (note 13) 1903; Durry, op. cit. (note 6) 22. Cavalry: Th. Mommsen, op. cit. (note 16) 17; 46 f. — Idem, Römisches Staatsrecht II 2,808; M. Bang, Die Germanen im römischen Dienst bis zum Regierungsantritt Constantins I (1906) 69. — Bellen, op. cit. (note 2) 56 strangely considers them to be both cavalry and infantry because they were part of the watch in the palace; yet just that function could be fulfilled by horsemen, see Dio 73(74),9,3. The decurions of the *Germani*, it seems, cannot prove their cavalry character, for they may as well belong to the (household) *decuriae*, see the discussion by Bellen, *ibid.* 46 ff.

<sup>24</sup> *Année Épigr.* 1978,286. Dio's trustworthiness in his report quoted above has been established by A. Passerini, *Le coorti pretorie* (1939) 46 f. against the doubts by Durry, op. cit. (note 6) 61 ff. Only based on general considerations are the doubts by H. Freis, *Die cohortes urbanae*. *Bonner Jahrb. Beih.* 21 = *Epigr. Stud.* 2 (1967) 38 f., see now G. E. F. Chilver, *A Historical Commentary on Tacitus' Histories I and II* (1979) 16 f.; D. L. Kennedy, *Some Observations on the Praetorian Guard*, *Ancient Society* 9, 1978, 275 ff., while suggesting that Dio's establishment of the praetorians belongs to the Antonine period, at least credits him with the correct strength of the cohorts: 1000 men; see also M. G. Angeli Bertinelli, *Gli effettivi della legione e della coorte pretoria*. *Istituto Lombardo di Scienze e Lettere, Rendiconti. Classe di Lettere* 108, 1974, 3 ff.

<sup>25</sup> *Contra*: A. v. Domaszewski, *Der Truppensold der Kaiserzeit*. *Neue Heidelberger Jahrb.* 10, 1900, 218 ff. esp. 228 note 4.

<sup>26</sup> See the fine survey by Bellen, op. cit. (note 2) 82 ff. Tacitus reports, *Annals* 15, 58, 2, *volitabantque per fora, per domos, rura quoque et proxima municipiorum pedites equitesque permixti Germanis quibus fidebat princeps quasi externis*. Bellen, *ibid.* 56, note 154 cites this as a reason to believe that there were also *pedites Germani*, yet one may rather draw the opposite conclusion from this passage.

from among the best horsemen of the *alae* after some five years of service<sup>27</sup>. It is very possible that some or most of the *Germani corporis custodes* were likewise selected from the frontier cavalry units<sup>28</sup>. Of course, the *Germani* might also be picked raw recruits from the tribes on the Lower Rhine, and some might even have been acquired as slaves. Any such manner of recruitment would explain the fact that in A.D. 9, after the defeat of Varus in the Teutoburg Forest, Augustus temporarily banished the *Germani corporis custodes* from the capital<sup>29</sup>.

If the *corporis custodes* were indeed select horsemen, then they may be recognized in Germanicus' guard of A.D. 16 during the expedition against the Cherusci (Tacitus, *Annals* 2,16): *cum duabus praetoriis cohortibus ac delecto equite Caesar*. D. Saddington observed that this recalls a similar passage by Tacitus, describing the force Drusus used in A.D. 14 to suppress the revolt of the Pannonian legions (*Ann.* 1,24): *cum . . . duabus praetoriis cohortibus . . . additur magna pars praetoriani equitis et robora Germanorum qui tum custodes imperatori aderant*<sup>30</sup>. The parallelism of the two passages suggests the guard units in both cases were similar<sup>31</sup>. If so, the *Germani corporis custodes* would have served as a fighting force in campaigns as did their successors, the *equites singulares Augusti*<sup>32</sup>.

#### 4. The Banishment of the Germani from Rome after the Defeat of Varus

Cassius Dio reports the following (56,23,4): ἐπειδὴ τε συχνοὶ ἐν τῇ Ῥώμῃ καὶ Γαλάται καὶ Κελτοί, οἱ μὲν ἄλλως ἐπιδημοῦντες οἱ δὲ καὶ ἐν τῷ δορυφορικῷ στρατευόμενοι, ἦσαν, ἐφοβήθη μὴ τι νεοχμῶσωσι, καὶ τούτους μὲν ἐς νήσους τινὰς ἀπέστειλε, τοῖς δ' ἀόπλοις ἐκχωρῆσαι τῆς πόλεως προσέταξε.

“And as there were in Rome numerous Gauls and Germans, some sojourning there for various reasons, other serving in the bodyguard, he feared they might begin a rebellion; hence he sent the latter to certain islands and ordered those who were unarmed to leave the city.”

<sup>27</sup> M. Speidel, *Die Equites Singulares Augusti*. *Antiquitas* 1,11 (1965) 4f. Dio's term ἐπίλεκτοι is the same as that used to describe *singulares* picked from other units, see Speidel, *op. cit.* (note 15) 49.

<sup>28</sup> *Année Épig.* 1952, 145 = Bellen, *op. cit.* (note 2) 109 A 12 died at 18 years of age; CIL VI 8806 = JLS I 1727 = Bellen *ibid.* 112 A 20 died after two years of service – neither can have served long in a frontier *ala*, but they may have been sons of *corporis custodes*. The fact that Caligula ostensibly travelled to Germany to replenish the Batavi guard (*Suet. Cal.* 43; Bellen, *ibid.* 34 ff.) does not reveal whether he was looking for soldiers or for civilians.

<sup>29</sup> Dio 79,6 reports as an eyewitness that Caracalla's Germanic guard consisted of free-born men and slaves alike, and that their presence with the emperor resulted in embassies from those tribes and conspiracies to invade the empire.

<sup>30</sup> Saddington, *op. cit.* (note 19) 92 f; *idem*, *The Development of the Roman Auxiliary Forces from Augustus to Trajan*. *ANRW* II 3, 1975, 176 ff. esp. 180 f. Compare Bellen, *op. cit.* (note 2) 28.

<sup>31</sup> They will have included, of course, the princes' own (less numerous) *corporis custodes*, for which see Bellen, *ibid.* 22 ff. Possibly also Germanicus' *equites singulares*, as I suggested: Speidel, *op. cit.* (note 15) 61.

<sup>32</sup> *Id.*, *op. cit.* (note 27) 87 f.

The fact that Augustus sent the *Germani corporis custodes* away is confirmed by Suetonius (Aug. 49,1): *dimissa . . . Germanorum (manu) quam usque ad cladem Varianam inter armigeros circa se habuerat*. Dio uses an excellent source in his account of the Varian disaster<sup>33</sup>, hence one may be justified in scrutinizing his report closely. There is no doubt that Dio means Gauls when he speaks of Galatians, and Germans when he speaks of Celts<sup>34</sup>, the latter being in the body guard.

Why should unarmed Gauls be expelled from Rome when there is a rebellion in Germany? One may question Bellen's interpretation of Dio when he suggests Augustus sent the Gauls away because the Romans could not distinguish them from Germans and might embroil them in a riot<sup>35</sup>. Dio is quite clear in reporting Augustus' fear that the Gauls and Germans *themselves* might start an uprising. The verb νεοχμῶσι with the direct object (τί) cannot mean that they merely were the passive cause of a disturbance. The danger posed by the Gauls and Germans in Rome obviously lay in their connection with the tribes and army units on the Rhine.

Arminius' revolt was carried out, perhaps, mainly by rebellious auxiliaries, and after their victory in the Teutoburg forest their strategy was to move against the Rhine frontier, i.e. ultimately against the legionary camps there. Our reports of this are confirmed by the countermeasures the Romans took<sup>36</sup>. Such a strategy was sensible only if the rebels — whether tribes or auxiliaries — could hope to win over a good many of the remaining auxilia and to stir the German and Gallic tribes into rebellion as the *Batavi* did in A.D. 70<sup>37</sup>. Indeed, Velleius (2,120) speaks of *vaccillantium etiam cis Rhenum sitarum gentium*: Augustus clearly feared further rebellions by Germanic and Gallic tribes, and he must have assumed that the *Germani corporis custodes* were sympathetic to their tribes<sup>38</sup>. Divided loyalty of the horseguards would be a compelling reason to send them to those islands<sup>39</sup>. Such sympathies and loyalty arise as a matter of course among men of common tribal origin, and they would be stronger still if the rebels were above all auxiliaries and if the *corporis custodes* were selected from among the auxilia on the Rhine frontier.

As for the unarmed Gauls in Rome, one may wonder whether they did not include ambassadors from those tribes, leaders that might inform the *Germani corporis custodes* of what was happening and might conspire with them. They

<sup>33</sup> D. Timpe, *Arminius-Studien*. Bibl. Klass. Altertswiss. N. F. 2, 34 (1970) passim, esp. p. 119; cf. Saddington, op. cit. (note 19) 188.

<sup>34</sup> Timpe, op. cit.; Bellen, op. cit. (note 2) 40 note 39.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid. 40 f.

<sup>36</sup> Timpe, op. cit. (note 33) 113 f. Timpe's thesis of Arminius as a commander of regular auxilia is adopted by Saddington, op. cit. (note 19) 188 but questioned e.g. by H. v. Petrikovits RGA 5, 1982, 14 ff. esp. 18 s.v. *Clades Variana*. The point to be made here does not depend on it.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid. 114.

<sup>38</sup> G. Walser, *Rom, das Reich und die fremden Völker in der Geschichtsschreibung der frühen Kaiserzeit* (1951) 107. Compare Timpe, op. cit. (note 33) 115.

<sup>39</sup> The *corporis custodes* as a cavalry unit of perhaps as many as a thousand men might have been able to create difficulties comparable to what the Batavian cohorts did in A.D. 68, cf. Tacitus, *Histories* 2,27; 1,59, even if on a smaller scale.

might even conspire — or be feared to conspire — with Augustus' enemies in Rome. Cicero's writings kept the memory alive of how once the ambassadors of the Allobroges had conspired with Catiline against the guardian consul of Rome.

As it turned out, the tribe of the *Batavi* and the Batavian auxilia, including the *corporis custodes*, did not join the rebellion. Hence Augustus, after a while, could safely recall his bodyguard from the islands (purged, no doubt, of Cheruskans if there had been any). Nevertheless, their banishment by Augustus, short though it may have been, highlights their political connection with events in Germany and Gaul, a connection that will explain why the *Germani* eventually were cashiered by Galba.

### 5. The End of the Germani Corporis Custodes and the Absence of an Auxiliary Cavalry Guard during the Flavian Period

Suetonius reports of Galba (12,2): *Germanorum cohortem a Caesaribus olim ad custodiam corporis institutam multisque experimentis fidelissimam dissolvit ac sine commodo ullo remisit in patriam, quasi Cn. Dolabellae, iuxta cuius hortos tendebat, proniore.* Galba dismissed the *Germani* because they favored Dolabella for emperor rather than himself. In contrast to this it has been said that Galba's true motive for disbanding the unit was to punish it for betraying Nero<sup>40</sup>. Yet Galba, himself a traitor against Nero, can hardly have intended to punish thus the men who opened the way for him to power, even though generally it might be true that a bodyguard's betrayal of any emperor is a betrayal of its *raison d'être*. More likely there were indeed reasons for the *Germani corporis custodes* to turn against Galba<sup>41</sup>.

When Galba became emperor, he punished the vanquishers of Vindex, his former ally<sup>42</sup>. Now, it was precisely *eques Batavus* who had defeated Vindex<sup>43</sup>. It seems likely, therefore, that Galba harbored illwill against the Batavian auxilia, illwill that was reciprocated and spread to the *corporis custodes*, whereupon the latter began to consider treason<sup>44</sup>. For a hundred years it had been to the great advantage of the *corporis custodes* to be faithful to the emperors. Even in the case of Nero they had given up only after the praetorians had come out against Nero and thus no hope was left. Now Galba with his mindless *saevitia* and *avaritia* destroyed even this most reliable underpinning of an emperor's safety. This is the meaning of Suetonius' passage on the cashiering of the unit. Indeed, the *Germani corporis custodes* would have been foolish to toy with treason unless they had a

<sup>40</sup> F. Grosso, L'importanza dei "Corporis Custodes" nella successione all' impero romano, *Clio*, Trimestrale di Studi Storici 1, 1965, 389 ff. for a discussion of Dolabella see *ibid.* 403 f.

<sup>41</sup> Thus Bellen's thesis, (note 2) 94 ff; 104. Bellen is right, though, in taking the conspiracy of the *corporis custodes* with Dolabella for a fact: *ibid.* 95.

<sup>42</sup> Tacitus, *Histories* 1,51 ff.

<sup>43</sup> Tacitus, *Histories* 4,17: *ne Vindicis aciem cogitarent: Batavo equite protritros Aeduos Arvernosque.*

<sup>44</sup> I cannot agree with the thesis that the Batavian auxilia were consistently friendly to Galba as described by M. S. A. Woodside, *The Role of Eight Batavian Cohorts in the Events of 68–69 A.D.* *Transactions and Proc. of the American Philol. Assoc.* 68, 1937, 277 ff.

very compelling reason to do so. Such a reason would have been Galba's *saevitia* and *avaritia* against the conquerors of Vindex<sup>45</sup>, i.e. his deteriorating relationship with the armies in Germany.

When the *Germani corporis custodes* had become a liability in Rome, it would have been wise to send them as a reinforcement to some frontier district, thereby preserving a well-trained unit of elite soldiers. This was suggested by Bellen who sees in them the *cohors Batavorum* of A.D. 69 and 70 under the command of Civilis<sup>46</sup>. Such, however, seems not to have been the decision of Galba, for Suetonius, our only informant, says Galba dissolved the unit. What makes it quite clear that the soldiers were actually discharged is Suetonius' remark that they did not get any *commoda*. *Commoda* are discharge benefits, given to soldiers when they leave the service<sup>47</sup>. The *Germani*, it seems, received instead the *missio ignominiosa* for treason, and, at least for the reign of Galba, their service was at an end.

Under the Flavian emperors no *Germani corporis custodes* are known<sup>48</sup>. Here again, the political standing of the *Batavi* and their neighbours may provide the explanation. Immediately after their accession the Flavians had to fight a major war against the Batavians. No wonder they would not entrust their persons to a guard from that nation. Nor had they any reason to honor the auxilia of Lower Germany which they had just defeated. Instead of *Germani corporis custodes*, Otho and the Flavians relied on regular auxiliary cavalry to brigade the praetorian cavalry into an efficient fighting force, a task that formerly had fallen to the *Germani corporis custodes* and afterwards fell to the *equites singulares Augusti*<sup>49</sup>.

## 6. The Equites Singulares Augusti as the Successors of the Germani Corporis Custodes

The new cavalry guard of the *equites singulares Augusti* instituted by Trajan took its title from the guards of the provincial armies<sup>50</sup>. In this respect they did not revive the tradition of the *Germani corporis custodes*, even though it fulfilled many of the same functions. As for its ethnic composition, during the second and

<sup>45</sup> Suetonius, Galba 16: *Sed maxime fremebat superioris Germaniae exercitus fraudari se praemis navatae adversus Gallos et Vindicem operae*. Tacitus, Histories 1,52: *secutura Germanorum auxilia*. Galba's *saevitia* and *avaritia*: Suetonius, Galba 12; Tacitus, Histories 1,37.

<sup>46</sup> Bellen, op. cit. (note 2) 98. Since the *corporis custodes* were mounted, one would expect an *ala*.

<sup>47</sup> See e.g. Suetonius, Augustus, 49: *definitis ... commodis missionum*; Nero 32: *commoda veteranorum*; Caligula 44: *commoda emeritae militiae*.

<sup>48</sup> Thus rightly Bellen, op. cit. (note 2) 69 ff against F. Grosso, *Il diritto Latino ai militari in età Flavia*. *Rivista di Cultura Classica e Medievale* 7, 1965, 541 ff.

<sup>49</sup> According to Durry, op. cit. (note 6) 99 f. and Passerini, op. cit. (note 24) 69, the *equites praetoriani*, although about 1000 strong, had no commander and no tactical officers (such as *decuriones*) and hence their main duty was to be at the service of tribunes and prefects. Otho: Tacitus, Histories 2,24 *ex praetorio auxiliisque mille equites*. Flavians: *Année Épigr.* 1972, 572: *praefectus alae et vexilli praetorianorum donis militaribus donatus*, etc. cf. H. Devijver, *Prosopographia militiarum equestrium quae fuerunt ab Augusto ad Gallienum Symbolae Ser. A 3,1 (1976) A 166. Equites singulares Augusti* together with *equites praetoriani*: "Hyginus" *De mun. castr.* 7 f.

<sup>50</sup> For the singulares of the provincial governors see my essay *Guards of the Roman Armies*. *Antiquitas* 1,28 (1978).

third century A.D. an average of only 20% of its soldiers came from Germany, but it would be rash to conclude that here, too, the *equites singulares Augusti* remained outside the tradition of the *Germani corporis custodes*<sup>51</sup>, for it seems that at the beginning the horsemen from Lower Germany indeed predominated among Trajan's *singulares*. Our sources, too scanty to admit statistical proof, allow us to draw this conclusion at least in an "impressionistic" way.

Upon enrollment in the guard, Trajan's *singulares* received the emperor's name Ulpus, unless they were already Roman citizens and had Roman names. Later, horsemen enrolled by Hadrian or Antoninus Pius received the names Aelius or Aurelius<sup>52</sup>. Consequently, the gravestones of the *equites singulares Augusti* that mention only soldiers with the name Ulpus tend to be the oldest. Admittedly, it is possible that some Ulpus, having inherited the name from their fathers, enrolled in the guard during later reigns, but in searching for the oldest gravestones one can eliminate most of these later Ulpus by setting aside those recording the name Ulpus together with later names such as Aelius, Aurelius or Septimius. Of the earliest gravestones thus identified, the following ones give the soldiers' origins:

- CIL VI 3296 *Ulpia Traiana*  
 3298 *Cl. Ara*  
 3299 *Cl. Ara*  
 3311 *Cl. Ara*  
 3302 *natione Helvetius*  
 AE 1954, 82 *Lugdunum*  
 CIL VI 3301 *natione Britto*  
 CIL X 7290<sup>53</sup> *na(tione) R(a)etus*  
 CIL VI 32807 *[e]x Pann [----]*  
 AE 1968, 31<sup>54</sup> *Pann. inf.*

In this list four out of ten men are from Lower Germany. A similar picture emerges from the dedications of the *equites singulares Augusti*, most of which have consular dates. Among those set up before A.D. 137 and hence possibly belonging to soldiers enrolled by Trajan, one finds the following origins mentioned:

- CIL VI 31139 (A.D. 128) *cives Tribocus, Cl. Ara*  
 31140 (A.D. 132) 3 *Traianenses Baetasii, 1 Fl. Sirmi*  
 31144 (A.D. 136) *Raetus*  
 31171 (A.D. 133)<sup>55</sup> *cives Nemens*  
 Speidel<sup>56</sup> (A.D. 133) *Cl. Viruni*

<sup>51</sup> 20% : see Speidel, op.cit. (note 27) 16 ff. ; not successors : ibid. 91 ; Bellen op. cit. (note 2) 99. Contra : Mommsen, op. cit. (note 16) 46 ff.

<sup>52</sup> Speidel, op. cit. (note 27) 1 ff. ; 61 ff.

<sup>53</sup> Id., Zwei weitere Raeter bei den kaiserlichen Gardereitern. Bayer. Vorgeschbl. 48, 1983, 187 f.

<sup>54</sup> This inscription is not reliably read and probably of a third-century date ; it is listed here solely to include all texts that mention Ulpus without demonstrably later names.

<sup>55</sup> Cf. M. Ulpus Nonius of CIL VI 31141 for the date.

<sup>56</sup> Noricum als Herkunftsgebiet der kaiserlichen Gardereiter. Jahresh. Österr. Arch. Inst. Beibl. 54, 1983, 214 ff. note 2.

In this list four out of eight soldiers come from Lower Germany. If both lists are combined, the sum is eight out of eighteen, i.e. almost half the men<sup>57</sup>, while the province of Lower Germany had no more than 3% or 4% of the empire's cavalry units<sup>58</sup>.

Trajan, then, by raising his *equites singulares Augusti* mainly from troops in Lower Germany, deliberately resumed the tradition of the former *Germani corporis custodes*. By then the Batavian auxilia were no longer the strategically decisive power they had been in the Julio-Claudian period<sup>59</sup>, hence Trajan and his successors had to widen their base of support by honoring other provincial armies as well with service in the horseguards<sup>60</sup>. Nevertheless, in raising his *singulares* primarily in Lower Germany, Trajan not only restored a necessary counterweight to the praetorians in a way sanctioned by past practice, but he also reconciled the *Batavi* and their neighbours to their historic role of armed service for the empire. By giving them back the honor<sup>61</sup> of providing troops for the emperor's own horseguards he endorsed the tradition of the *Germani corporis custodes*. Herein Trajan shared the view of the historians, expressed by his contemporary, Suetonius: *Germanorum cohors . . . multis experimentis fidelissima*.

---

<sup>57</sup> The men from outside Lower Germany could, of course, have been enrolled in the guard by Hadrian if they had served many years in an *ala* before their transfer. Alternatively, they may have served in an *ala* stationed in Lower Germany when they were transferred to the guard (cf. CIL VI 31162 of A.D. 219, set up by *civesBatavi sive Thraces adlecti ex provincia Germania inferiori*) — theoretically, therefore, it is possible that Trajan recruited his entire guard in Lower Germany.

<sup>58</sup> Based on the survey figures of G. L. Cheesman, *The Auxilia of the Roman Imperial Army* (1914) 145 ff. For the *alae* in Lower Germany see G. Alföldy, *Die Hilfstruppen in der römischen Provinz Germania inferior* (1968) 160 ff.

<sup>59</sup> For the shift of cavalry recruitment from the Rhine to the Danube see Bang, *op. cit.* (note 23) 25 ff. and K. Kraft, *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur antiken Geschichte und Militärgeschichte* (1973) 181 ff. esp. 200.

<sup>60</sup> For the case of Raetia see my study *Raetien als Herkunftsgebiet der kaiserlichen Gardereiter*. Bayer. Vorgeschl. 46, 1981, 105 ff.; *id.*, *op. cit.* (note 53).

<sup>61</sup> From the fact that it was an honor to have a *Germani* guard (Tacitus, *Annals* 13,18, *Germanos nuper eundem in honorem custodes additos*), one may infer that it was also an honor to serve in that guard, quite aside from general considerations.