

TACITUS, HISTORIES 2,14,2

Having reported the dispatch and the early exploits of the maritime expedition Otho launched against Narbonese Gaul (Hist. 2,12–13), Tacitus moves on to the counter-measures taken by the Vitellians, and enumerates the forces sent by Fabius Valens to beat back the invaders (2,14,1): *duodecim equitum turmae et lecti e cohortibus adversus hostem iere, quibus adiuncta Ligurum cohors, vetus loci auxilium, et quingenti Pannonii, nondum sub signis. [2] nec mora proelio: sed acies ita instructa, ut pars classicorum mixtis paganis in colles mari propinquos exsurgeret, quantum inter colles ac litus aequi loci praetorianus miles expleret, in ipso mari ut adnexa classis et pugnae parata conversa et minaci fronte praetenderetur.*

It is clear from what follows that the *aciēs* of § 2 must denote the Othonian battle-line, and there are editors who consider this reason enough to accept the text as it stands¹. But more than one scholar has expressed disquiet over the abrupt switch in subject, and various supplements have been proposed. Urlichs inserted <Othonianis> between *proelio* and *sed*²; Nipperdey wanted <*ab Othonianis*> and Valmaggì <Othonianorum> after *acies*³; Andresen suggested that the *sed* should be emended to *hinc*, although he conceded readily that such a corruption could not be explained⁴; and Wellesley, likewise focusing on the *sed*, concluded

¹ Thus W. Heraeus, *Cornelii Taciti Historiae*, Buch I und II, Leipzig and Berlin ⁶1929, 144 observed that the following *classicorum* makes clear whose line is meant, an explanation repeated by F.G. Moore, *The Histories of Tacitus*, Books I and II, New York 1910, 188; cf. G.E.F. Chilver, *A Historical Commentary on Tacitus' 'Histories' I and II*, Oxford 1979, 180. The Mediceus actually reads *acie*, but Ruperti's *acies* is accepted by all the recent editions I have been able to check. Nor have they been taken with Thoma's proposal to replace the Mediceus' *sed* with *et*.

² L. Urlichs, *Kritische Bemerkungen zu dem älteren Plinius und zu Tacitus*, in: RhM 31, 1876, 507, justifying the insertion and its positioning with the thesis that the name of the troops fell out "zwischen o und s".

³ Nipperdey made his suggestion in his edition of the Histories (Berlin 1872), which I have not been able to consult. In support of his proposal L. Valmaggì, *Cornelio Tacito. Il libro secondo delle Storie*, Turin 1897, 195 f., compared Hist. 3, 25, 1: *rariore iam Vitellianorum acie*.

⁴ G. Andresen, reviewing E. Wolff, *Taciti Historiarum Libri*, Buch I und II, ²Berlin 1914, in: WkPh 31, 1914, 1060, and remarking in the process that the problem (insofar as there is a problem) is neither the grammatical case of *acies* nor the relative merits of *sed* and *et* (cf. Valmaggì, op. cit. 196); also 'Zu Tacitus', in: WkPh 32, 1915, 958.

that it masked a reference to the Othonian commander Suedius Clemens (2,12,1), and printed *S<u>ed<io>*⁵. We could, of course, brush the matter aside by finding fault with Tacitus, be it for carelessness or for excessive concision⁶. But the one reasoned and plausible defence offered in face of these objections, Heubner's suggestion that, since the Othonians are Tacitus' main focus, he reverts to them the moment he has specified the forces assembled by the Vitellians, has not proved entirely persuasive⁷. Hence it seems worth pointing out that there are two more grounds for accepting the existing text.

Let us begin with the word that has caused all the controversy, *acies*. Though Tacitus' usage does not differ significantly from those of other Roman writers who deal with such material, the dictionaries and concordances tend to subdivide the noun according to three basic meanings, a battle line properly so called, "totus exercitus", and "proelium ipsum"⁸. This, however, has obscured the question of what forces normally made up an *acies*, and it is from this point of view that we need to survey the other 139 cases where Tacitus resorts to the word⁹. We can ignore the four figurative examples in the Dialogus, since they involve merely the cliché of the *acies forensis*¹⁰. No more is to be gained by dwelling on the forty-three instances in which the historian employs *acies* as a synonym for *proelium*, another cliché as we shall see presently¹¹. Nor need we delay unduly over the 35 cases where Tacitus

⁵ K. Wellesley, Cornelius Tacitus, *Historiae*, Leipzig 1989, ad loc. For his defence of the emendation see Tacitus, 'Histories': a Textual Survey, 1939-1989, in: ANRW II, 33, 3 (Berlin/New York 1991), 1662. It is dismissed as "gratuitous" by J. Hellegouarc'h, in: *Gnomon* 63, 1991, 272.

⁶ These are the views respectively of Chilver, op. cit. 180, and H. Goelzer, *Œuvres de Tacite, Histoires I-II*, Paris 1920, 198.

⁷ H. Heubner, P. Cornelius Tacitus, *Die Historien, Band II: Zweites Buch*, Heidelberg 1968, 67.

⁸ Thus A. Gerber and A. Greef, *Lexicon Taciteum*, Leipzig 1903, 20-21; cf. C. Kempf, *ThesLL* 1, 1900, 402-412.

⁹ D.R. Blackman and G.G. Betts, *A Concordance to Tacitus*, Hildesheim/Zürich/New York 1986, 1, 17-18. I have used the Teubner texts of the *Agricola* by J. Delz (1983), of the *Germania* by A. Önnersfors (1983), and of the *Dialogus, Histories and Annals* by H. Heubner (1983, 1978 and 1983 respectively).

¹⁰ Dial. 5, 6; 26,5; 32,2; 37,8. Compare Cic. de or. 1,157; Quintil. 10,1,29 also R. Güngerich, *Kommentar zum Dialogus des Tacitus*, Göttingen 1980, 19 f. and literature there cited.

¹¹ Since it is not always easy to tell when the idea of battle is more important than that of the battle line (see, e.g., Germ. 8,1) I have limited my count to passages where this particular meaning seems to me indisputable: Agr. 32,4; Germ. 14,1 [bis]; Hist. 1,51,1; 89,2; 2,13,1 (on this see below); 43,1; 46,1; 62,1; 66,1; 76,4; 3,51,1; 68,1; 4,17,2-3; 21,1; 27,1; 29,3; 33,4; 39,3; 50,4; 58,1 and 4; 62,1; 67,2; 77,3; 5,15,1; 16,3; Ann. 1,2,1; 63,2; 2,5,3; 13,1; 14,4; 64,1; 3,13,2; 39,2; 76,1; 4,44,2; 12,28,1; 32,1; 34,1; 50,1; 14,35,2. In two of these passages Tacitus couples *acies* with *proelium* (His. 4,58,1; Ann. 3,39,2), but this is meant to strengthen the expression: see H. Heubner, P. Cornelius Tacitus, *Die Historien, Band IV: Viertes Buch* (Heidelberg 1976), 136. Compare also Livy 22,39,7 (*proelia atque acies*); 28,19,11 (*in pugna et in acie*); 30,35,4 (*et ante aciem et in proelio*).

applies the noun to non-Roman formations, since – with but one exception – these too reflect standard usage. Thus there is a passage where the Vulsci and Aequi appear (Ann. 11,24,5), five where *acies* denotes the battle line of British tribesmen¹², thirteen where it is applied to Germans¹³, another seven where Tacitus so describes Civilis' forces¹⁴, one where it covers Jewish rebels (Hist. 5,11,1), and four where assorted eastern potentates are involved (Ann. 6,34,3 [bis] and 35,1; 13,40,1). And within this category, finally we can set the four examples where the battle line is not attributed to one specific group¹⁵.

It has been observed that whether a Roman author is talking of his own forces or the enemy's, it is exceptional for him to use *acies* of cavalry or of ships, and so it is with Tacitus. There is but one case where the noun is applied to a line of cavalry, carefully so denominated (Hist. 4,71,5: *equitum aciem in collem erigeret*), and one where it is used of a line of ships, likewise spelled out (Hist. 5,23,1: *Civilem cupido incessit navalem aciem ostentandi*)¹⁶. But it is not enough to say that in the remaining fifty-six cases involving Roman troops Tacitus employs *acies* of any infantry formation. What seems not to have attracted attention or, at any rate, what seems not to have prompted explicit comment is that the line should be made up, in whole or in part, of regular foot soldiers, be they legionaries or praetorians. Hence, there are fifty-two passages where Tacitus uses *acies* of formations which include infantry properly so called¹⁷, only four where he resorts to the noun to describe a line comprised exclusively of auxiliaries, and in each of these four instance he is careful to specify as much. At Agr. 35,2 Agricola so arranged things *ut peditum auxilia, quae octo milium erant, mediam aciem firmarent, equitum tria milia corni-*

¹² Agr. 33,1; 34,3; 35,3; 37,2; Ann. 14,30,1.

¹³ Germ. 3,1; 6,3–4; 7,1; 8,1; 31,3; Ann. 2,11,1; 14,3; 16,2; 21,1; 45,2; 4,73,2; 13,57,2.

¹⁴ Hist. 4,28,3 (see G.E.F. Chilver and G.B. Townend, A Historical Commentary on Tacitus' 'Histories' IV and V, Oxford 1985, 29; 24,2; 29,1; 34,1; 77,1; 5,17,1; 23,1 (this last is the exceptional passage: see below).

¹⁵ Agr. 34,1 (*ignota acies*); Hist. 1,79,2 (*vix ulla acies*); 5,13,1 (*visae per caelum concurrere acies*); Ann. 4,33,4 (*Punicas Romanasve acies*).

¹⁶ For *acies* used of cavalry Heubner, op. cit. 160 cites only Livy 4,19,5. See also Caesar, BG 7,67,1; BAfr. 13,1–2; 38,3; 39,4; 70,4; Sallust, BJ 97,4; Vell. Pat. 2,112,5; Curtius 7,9,13; Livy 8,39,1; 28,33,14; 35,35,7 (of elephants); also below, note 19. For *acies* used of ships, H. Heubner and W. Fauth, P. Cornelius Tacitus, Die Historien, Band V: Fünftes Buch, Heidelberg 1982, 171 cite Mela 2,26 and Frontinus, Strat. 2,5,47 (cf. also 2,13,9). Note, in addition, Caesar, BC 1,58,1; BAlex. 45,4; Nepos, Hann. 11,1; Livy 30,10,4; 36,45,6; 37,13,8; 23,9; 29,7–8; 30,6 (bis). At 26,39,13 moreover, Livy compares a naval battle explicitly to a *pedestris acies*. Not that this is as remarkable as the two cases where he has civilians make up a battle line (4,33,1–2; 31,24,9).

¹⁷ Thus Agr. 18,2 (on this see R.M. Ogilvie and I.A. Richmond, *Cornelii Taciti de vita Agricolae*, Oxford 1967, 210); 32,3; 35,4; Hist. 2,15,2 (on which there will be more to say below); 25,1–2 (on § 1 see below, note 19); 26,2; 28,2; 41,2–3; 42,2; 44,1 and 3; 3,2,3; 18,2; 21,2; 22,2–3; 23,1, 2 and 3; 25,1 and 3; 32,2; 71,1; 82,3; 4,16,2; 18,1; 20,3; 25,1; 26,3; 33,1; 34,3–4; 46,3; 78,1; 85,2; 5,16,1; Ann. 1,64,4; 65,6; 2,16,3; 17,3; 20,1; 21,2; 80,2; 3,20,2; 46,1; 4,24,2; 47,1; 12,35,2; 14,34,1; 15,16,3.

*bus adfunderentur. legiones pro vallo stetere, ingens victoriae decus citra Romanum sanguinem bellandi, et auxilium, si pellerentur*¹⁸. At Agr. 36,2 the historian reports that the *Batavi ... erigere in colles aciem coepere*. At Hist. 2,26,1 during the battle of Ad Castores, *Othonianus pedes erupit: protrita hostium acie versi in fugam etiam qui subveniebant; nam Caecina non simul cohortes, sed singulas acciverat, quae res in proelio trepidationem auxit*. The phrase *hostium acie* demonstrates clearly that the Vitellians are meant, but though it has been two chapters since Tacitus reported that the forces Caecina posted in ambush were composed of auxiliaries and cavalry (2,24,2), it surely would not have taxed the reader unduly to remember that *acies* was being used of auxiliaries, since these were in any case the troops best fitted to carry out Caecina's planned ambush and the only Vitellians enumerated so far¹⁹. Fourthly and finally, at Hist. 5,18,1, we find simply *et pellebatur sociarum cohortium acies*²⁰.

If we return now to our passage, the four exceptional cases just discussed will permit as a possibility the conclusion that *acies* would be taken by a Roman reader as a reference to the Vitellians. But inasmuch as Tacitus has said in so many words – according to Wellesley, indeed, “with more elaboration than the importance of the occasion would seem to require” – that the Vitellian force is made up exclusively of auxiliaries, even *quingenti Pannonii nondum sub signis*²¹, it is infinitely (strictly:

¹⁸ On the possible significance of this passage see Ogilvie and Richmond, op. cit. 271, repeated by H. Heubner, *Kommentar zum Agricola des Tacitus*, Göttingen 1984, 102 f., perhaps without adequate regard for the objections of J.S. Rainbird, *Tactics at Mons Graupius*, in: CR 19, 1969, 12–13.

¹⁹ To claim that the following *cohortes* will prod the reader's memory is no more persuasive than is Heraeus' explication of our passage (above, note 1). Tacitus' readiness to employ *acies* of the Vitellian auxiliaries at 26,1 was probably prompted, to some extent, by the intervening *antequam miscerentur acies, terga vertentibus Vitellianis* at 25.1. This is a poetic turn of phrase (see Heubner, op. cit. [above, note 7] 106, aptly adducing Silius Italicus, Pun. 12,394, and Statius, Theb. 12,717–8; also F.R.D. Goodyear, *The Annals of Tacitus*, II: Annals 1.55–81 and Annals 2, Cambridge 1981, 227 and n. 2), but appropriate to the context, given that Tacitus is talking as much of the Othonian forces (which include regular infantry, the praetorians) as of the Vitellians (in this instance the cavalry alone, since they had been sent on ahead in order to lure the Othonians into the ambush).

²⁰ Of the authors I have checked, the only one who seems to use *acies* to denote a line composed exclusively of auxiliaries is Livy, and many of his examples are not significant, since they involve one battle line amongst several (e.g., 22,45,7: *iaculatores ex ceteris levium armorum auxiliis prima acies facta*). But in reporting the skirmishing between Perseus of Macedon and P. Licinius Crassus in 171 (42,58,13–59,4), he does apply the noun four times to a Roman line made up of light-armed and cavalry only, and yet even here he indicates that the consul meanwhile kept his regular infantry drawn up in camp (58,11: *intra vallum peditum acie instructa*). The lack of other examples could be attributed, in part, to the fact that the surviving sources are not as a rule detailed enough to furnish such minutiae, and in part to the rarity of the procedure, whether or not it was the result of a change in Roman tactics (above, note 18).

²¹ Wellesley, ANRW (above, note 5) 1662. Since no satisfactory explanation has been offered for the presence of the 500 Pannonians (cf. Chilver, op. cit. [above, note 1] 179 f.;

thirteen times) more likely that our putative reader would assume what Tacitus himself regularly assumes, that an *acies* should contain proper infantry, and so that this particular *acies* must belong to the Othonians. Indeed, Tacitus has prepared the ground for just such a conclusion by associating the Othonians with *acies* one chapter earlier, commenting on their anger at securing no booty *in acie* (2,13,1). That the "battle" in question was an inglorious skirmish with the *montani* gathered by Marius Maturus proves how hackneyed was the use of the noun in this sense²². For our purposes, however, it is the association itself that is significant, especially when, a chapter later (2,15,2), Tacitus again applies *acies* exclusively to the Othonians, remarking that the Vitellian *Tungrarum cohortium praefecti sustentata diu acie telis obruuntur*.

The sceptic, no doubt, will respond that this argument proves only that Tacitus meant *acies* to apply to the Othonians, something nobody disputes, and that even if there is now no clamant need to modify the text, the historian has still failed to express himself clearly enough. This is why we need to turn our attention next to the words which immediately precede our problematical *acies*, *nec mora proelio sed*, and two observations are in order. First, there is nothing untoward about *nec mora proelio*. For that there are parallels enough in the poets and the prose writers alike²³, even though Tacitus prefers elsewhere to use a construction with *quo minus* or *quin*²⁴. The *sed* is another matter, and this is something that editors and com-

H. Le Bonniec and J. Hellegouarc'h, Tacite, Histoires Livres II & III, Paris 1989, 164 n. 11), it may not be too rash to suggest that they were new recruits who, until the war broke out, were undergoing basic training (hence *nondum sub signis*) in an area where the climate was rather more clement than that of their native land.

²² To illustrate the cliché's strength, Frontinus, Strat. 2,6,6 uses *acies* in its two different acceptations within a single sentence: *Agesilaus Lacedaimonius adversus Thebanos, cum acie confliget intellexissetque hostes locorum condicione clausos ob desperationem fortius dimicare, laxatis suorum ordinibus apertaue Thebanis ad evadendum via, rursus in abeuntis contraxit aciem et sine iactura suorum cecidit aversos*. Compare also Vell. Pat. 2,52,3-4 and 55,4.

²³ Cf. Vergil, Aen. 5,639 and 749; 12,565; Silius Italicus, Pun. 9,602; 14,97; 15,789; Statius, Theb. 1,533; cf. Valerius Flaccus, Argon. 4,129. Among prose writers see Livy 6,31,5; 9,13,2 (at 7,37,7 and 28,33,4 I take *pugnae* to be in each instance a dative but see the next note); Vell. Pat. 2,79,3.

²⁴ Tacitus uses *quin* three times (Hist. 2,31,2; Ann. 4,70,1; 13,45,4), *quo minus* once (Hist. 1,59,2). By contrast, Livy so uses *quin* once (22,12,3) and resorts to *quominus* only twice, then after *in mora esse* (26,3,8; 30,44,3). What Livy favours is the gentive, *dimicandi* (3,69,10; 7,27,6; 29,36,7), *concurrenti* (31,33,8) and *deditionis* (36,9,13); cf. Seneca, EM 107,11 (*parendi*) and HF 1171 (*pugnandi*). Among the other prose writers, *quominus* is used once by Cato (De agr. 148,1) once by Velleius (2,51,2), and twice by Seneca (de ben. 5,1,5 and 5,5,4); Florus goes with *quin* once (1,43,1).

mentators seem almost universally to have missed in their readiness to emend or – with the exception only of Wolff – to ignore the word²⁵. The expression *nec mora* and its equivalents *haud mora* and *nulla mora* are used by Roman writers, the poets especially, time after time, and for the most part asyndetically, as in Statius' *nec mora, prorumpit Tydeus* (Theb. 6,813)²⁶. But whether or not the phrase is employed in this concise form, it is very rarely followed by an adversative particle. Nor is the reason far to seek: the four other passages in which such adversatives appear are each and every one of them marked by a strong contrast²⁷.

At Conon 3,3 Nepos tells of his hero's seeking audience of the Persian king, and of his being informed by the vizier that an audience could be granted easily enough, but that a letter would obviate the need for proskynesis: *huic ille „nulla“ inquit „mora est, sed tu delibera, utrum colloqui malis an per litteras agere, quae cogitas“*. In Georgics 3,108–111 Vergil describes a chariot race in terms contrasting the heavens and the earth, the glory and the dirt: *iamque humiles iamque elati sublimē videntur | aëra per vacuum ferri atque adsurgere in auras. | nec mora nec requies; at fulvae nimbus harenae | tollitur, umescunt spumis flatuque sequentum*²⁸. At Silvae 5,2,1–3 Statius shifts from the departure of his friend Crispinus to its effects on himself: *rura meus Tyrrhena petit saltusque Tagetis | Crispinus; nec longa mora est aut avia tellus, | sed mea secreto velluntur pectora morsu*. And finally, at Met. 7,9 Apuleius describes the effect on the robbers – the reverse of what one might expect – of the speech by the seemingly unprepossessing youth Haemus, who, introduced to them as a potential member of their band, has urged them to make him their leader: *nec mora nec cunctatio, sed calculis omnibus ducatum latrones unanimes ei deferunt*²⁹.

²⁵ Wolff, op. cit. (above, note 4) 199: „Durch *sed* werden die etwas ungewöhnlichen Verhältnisse, unter welchem es zum Kampfe kam, eingeführt“. The explanation is unconvincing (as Andresen remarked), but no other editor has even attempted to account for the word's presence. Heubner, op. cit (note 7) 67 merely lists the Vergil and Apuleius passages discussed below.

²⁶ The usage, whatever the precise wording, is so common in the poets that to enumerate every example would produce a list of inordinate length. Perhaps it will be enough to indicate that there are 21 instances in Vergil (with two more in the Appendix Vergiliana), three in Propertius, 53 in Ovid, one in Lucan, one in Persius, 16 in Statius (including the passage quoted in the text), 14 in Silius Italicus, and four in Valerius Flaccus. It is more important, however, to note that the expression appears in Silver prose too: see Seneca, Apoc. 11,6; Petronius, Sat. 49,6 and 10; 64,7; 99,6 (cf. also 105,4); Pliny, Epist. 2,20,5. And it is surely for this same, abrupt effect that Tacitus tries at Ann. 14,57,4 (*nec ultra mora*).

²⁷ This is based on a survey of every single instance of *mora* in the file of the Packard Humanities Institute Corpus of Latin Texts (Version 5.3).

²⁸ There is no basis for the assertion that the *at* "is continuative, not adversative" (J. Conington, H. Nettleship and F. Haverfield, *The Works of Virgil: Eclogues and Georgics*, London 1898, 296). As is pointed out by R.F. Thomas, *Virgil, Georgics Books III–IV*, Cambridge 1988, 59, the passages Vergil is echoing (Homer, Il. 23,365–6; Sophocles, Elec. 714–5) both open with *δὲ*.

²⁹ What makes this instance remarkable is that it stands alone, whereas Apuleius resorts

To revert once again to the passage from which we started, it emerges that the deployment of *sed* after *nec mora* confirms our findings on the use of *acies*. So uncommon was it to employ an adversative particle after *nec mora* that the Roman reader would have recognised instantly the marked change of focus it introduced. Hence he would have had no difficulty in grasping that the following *acies* must in any case refer to the Othonian battle line. The wording is indeed concise, but not over-concise, still less thoughtless. As so often, Tacitus expresses himself with the greatest care, but we have to show comparable care if we are not to accuse him of faults of which he is guiltless³⁰.

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to *nec mora, cum* eighteen times in the Met. (2,17; 25; 3,2 [bis]; 9; 28; 4,4; 10; 19; 23; 5,6; 7; 6,18; 24; 7,9; 11,7 [bis]; 11).

³⁰ I wish to thank Bryan James and Richard Pianka for their help in assembling and verifying the lexicographical material which underpins this paper.