

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 Themistocles or Julius Caesar.

If this type of adroit, non-philosophical leadership fails, and the mentality of soldiers or city-mobs is utterly materialistic and violent, things will take a turn for the worst. In his *Galba* and his *Otho* Plutarch depicts such a worst case scenario, which he announces in the opening lines of the *Galba*, where he writes:

“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 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).

Starting from three passages in Plutarch's *Lives* of Galba and Otho this paper will show how the author applies this commonplace, which he uses in his *Lycurgus*, *Solon* and *Dion*, but also in his *Numa* and in some biographies of late republican Roman politicians, to this momentous year in Roman imperial history, the year of the four emperors, AD 69.