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NOMINE SUPERIORIS (TAC. GERM. 36,1)

Tuomo Pekkanen

K. Büchner has already argued twice, and determinedly, that in Tac.Germ. 36,1 *nomine superioris* needs no conjecture and that the conjectures proposed impede the correct interpretation of the context.¹ In this I fully agree with him and in my Finnish edition of the *Germania* (1976) I restored the reading of the MSS., which most modern editors, following Puteolanus (1496), change to *nomina superioris*. That I am once more taking up the much-disputed passage for discussion is due to the fact that, although his textual basis is correct, Büchner does not convince us with his argument. Büchner thinks that the context, when correctly understood, "erst den Blick öffnet für das Weltbild des Tacitus, das sich von den tiefsten griechischen wie den bisherigen römischen Konzeptionen wesentlich unterscheidet und eine bedeutende Erweiterung des historischen Horizontes der antiken Welt einschliesst."² If that is so, there is double reason to examine the chief points of his interpretation.

The passage in question deals with the Cherusci and belongs to the second part of the *Germania* (cc. 22—46), in which the individual tribes or tribal groups are discussed one by one. Having in c. 28 presented some non-German tribes and those living in the frontier region, Tacitus sets out to describe the inhabitants of Germany proper, first mentioning the Batavi (29,1), who occupied the island formed by the bifurcation of the Rhine, but were, like the Mattiaci (29,2) and the inhabitants of the *decumates agri* (29,3), subjects of the Roman Empire. The independent Germans, the first of whom are the Chatti, are presented in three geographical sections, cc. 30—34, 35—40, and 41—44,³ after which the description of the tribes of the eastern borderland (Aestii, Sithones, Peucini, Venethi, Fenni) and of the fabulous region beyond (Hellusii, Oxiones) concludes the book.

The first geographical section presents the tribes grouped around the Rhine (cf. 35,1 *Hactenus in occidentem Germaniam novimus*); in the second the author turns towards the northern coast to the east of the Rhine (ib. *in septentrionem ingenti flexu redit*, 41,1 *Et haec quidem pars Sueborum in secretiora Germaniae porrigitur*). In the second section two groups of tribes are clearly distinguished from each other: in cc. 35—37 the Chauci, Cherusci, Fosi and Cimbri, in cc. 38—40 the Suebic tribes of the North Sea.

The description of the former of the two groups, which is our

1 Die historischen Versuche, Stuttgart 1955, 306ff. and Studien zur Römischen Literatur IV, Wiesbaden 1964, 68—82.

2 Stud. IV, 68.

3 For the geographical order observed by Tacitus, cf. Arctos, Suppl. I (1968) 70—75.

main interest in this paper, ends with the famous excursus on the wars Rome waged with the Germans: "From the consulship of Caecilius Metellus and Papirius Carbo, when the Cimbrian armies were first heard of, to the second consulship of the Emperor Trajan, the total amounts to about 210 years: for that length of time has the conquest of Germany been in process... The German fighting for liberty has been a keener enemy than the absolutism of Arsaces... in recent times they have gratified the Romans with more triumphs than victories" (37,2—5). German bravery is attributed by Tacitus to their liberty, which makes them enemies more to be respected than the despotically ruled Parthians. *Libertas* is for him the precondition of *virtus*;⁴ the loss of *virtus* leads sooner or later to slavery.⁵ The author's admiration of the military persistence of the Germans, resisting all attempts at conquest, leaves no doubt. On the other hand, his dissatisfaction with the recent warfare of his compatriots against them is likewise clearly visible.

Tacitus' admiration of the unconquered enemies and his dissatisfaction with ineffective Roman warfare is understandable against the background of his general attitude to war. I. Kajanto, who has devoted a special study to this question,⁶ has arrived at the result that Tacitus was no pacifist; on the contrary, he was an imperialist and a militarist, dissatisfied with the passive politics of Augustus and Tiberius; his sarcastic comments upon the Gauls (Agr. 11,4) and the Romanization of the Britons (Agr. 21) were, according to Kajanto, "written by a man who so admired warlike spirit that he valued a hostile but brave barbarian more than a conquered but tame one"; he "valued war and conquest, thought long peace harmful to national morale, and gave scant attention to the horrors of war". Kajanto bases his conclusions on material drawn from Tacitus' historical works and the *Agricola*. For the *Germania* he points out that "it is a fact too well-known to be discussed" that its general tone was much the same.⁷

That passage 35—37 concludes with an excursus in militaristic tones is, I think, decisive for the correct interpretation of cc. 35—36.

Having first (35,1) emphasized the vastness of the territory covered by the Chauci, Tacitus describes them as follows: *populus inter Germanos nobilissimus quique magnitudinem suam malit iustitia tueri. sine cupiditate, sine impotentia, quieti secretique nulla provocant bella, nullis raptibus aut latrociniis populantur. id praecipuum virtutis ac virium argumentum est, quod, ut superiores agunt, non per iniurias assequuntur; prompta tamen omnibus arma ac, si res poscat, exercitus, plurimum virorum equorumque; et quiescenti-*

4 Cf. Büchner, *Stud. z. röm. Lit.* VIII, Wiesbaden 1970, 240.

5 Cf. Agr. 11,4, quoted on p. 73 below.

6 *Latomus* 29 (1970) 699—718.

7 *Ib.* 702—703.

bus eadem fama. The Cherusci, bordering on the Chauci and the Chatti — the author continues (36,1) — *nimiam ac marcentem diu pacem illacessiti nutrierunt: idque iucundius quam tutius fuit, quia inter impotentis et validos falso quiescas: ubi manu agitur, modestia ac probitas nomine superioris sunt. ita qui olim boni aequique Cherusci, nunc inertes ac stulti vocantur; Chattis victoribus fortuna in sapientiam cessit.*

The Chauci are praised by Tacitus as the noblest (*nobilissimus*) of the German tribes; they prefer to maintain their greatness by justice (*iustitia*), they are neither grasping nor intemperate (*sine cupiditate, sine impotentia*), in peaceful seclusion they provoke no wars and practise no robbery; the special proof of their valour and strength (*virtutis ac virium*) is that they do not depend for their superior position on injustice (*non per iniurias*); even though they keep the peace, their reputation does not suffer (*et quiescentibus eadem fama*). It has been pointed out by various commentators that this eulogy of the Chauci is idealized and does not agree with the truth.⁸ In ann. 13,55 Tacitus himself describes how the Chauci expelled the neighbouring Ampsivarii from their country and in ann. 11,18 he mentions their robberies in Germania inferior and on the Gallic coast: *per idem tempus Chauci... inferiorem Germaniam incursavere duce Gannasco, qui natione Canninefas, ... levibus navigiis praedabundus Gallorum maxime oram vastabat, non ignarus dites et imbelles esse.* Pliny's realistic account of the Chauci of the northern coast, preserved in nat. 16,2—4, but most likely repeated in his *Bella Germaniae*, which Tacitus certainly knew, is not utilised for Germ. 35.⁹ It is true that it is a tradition in ethnographic literature since Homer to describe the peoples of the north as the most righteous of men,¹⁰ but in the case of the Chauci there can be no question of such a tradition.

I think the eulogy of the Chauci is merely rhetorical and its purpose is to sharpen the contrast between them and the Cherusci, who — as Tacitus says — "were once righteous and moderate (*olim boni aequique*), but are now called indolent and stupid" (*nunc inertes ac stulti vocantur*). The word *olim* 'once' certainly refers to the glorious military past of the Cherusci,¹¹ who under Arminius took a leading part in defeating Varus (A.D. 9), in hindering the attempts at revenge made by Germanicus (A.D. 15 and 16) and in breaking up the Suebic confederacy of Maroboduus (A.D. 17). Before long, however, their fortunes changed and Arminius was murdered (A.D. 21) in internal feuds, which then continued and led to the interference

8 Cf. e.g. Anderson (1938) 168; Much (1967³) 409—410.

9 Cf. Anderson 170.

10 Cf. P. Aalto & T. Pekkanen, *Latin Sources on North-Eastern Eurasia I*, *Asiatische Forschungen* 44 (1975) 3—4, 55, 261.

11 The facts known about the Cherusci are summarized in Much 411—415.

of the Chatti, Langobardi and Romans, so that the Cherusci lost their political significance. In A.D. 47 their nobility had been annihilated in civil wars (Tac.ann. 11,16 *amissis per interna bella nobilibus*) and they had to ask Italicus, the son of Arminius' Roman-minded brother, to be their king. As late as A.D. 51 they were still of some importance, as the Chatti in their campaigns with the Romans feared to be attacked by them from the rear (Tac.ann. 12,28, quoted below). About 85 their king Chariomerus, driven out on account of his Roman leanings, appealed to Domitian, who gave him financial help (Dio 67,5). It is probable that the victory of the Chatti over them, referred to by Tacitus (*Chattis victoribus*), took place about the same time.¹²

The contrast between the Chauci and the Cherusci is also sharpened by Tacitus in that he exaggerates the languid peacefulness of the latter. This is evident from ann. 12,28, in which, in connection with the events of A.D. 52, he refers to the perpetual hostilities between them and the Chatti: *illi (sc. Chatti) metu, ne hinc Romanus, inde Cherusci, cum quis aeternum discordant, circumgrederentur, legatos in urbem et obsides misere*. The words *cum quis aeternum discordant* do not accord with the statement *pacem illacessiti nutritierunt*, made about the Cherusci. Of course the contradiction between the two statements may partly be due to the fact that Tacitus' historical studies had shed new light on many details, but the main reason is certainly that he wanted to emphasize the contrast between the peacefulness of the Cherusci and that of the Chauci.¹³ The latter also lived in peace (*quieti secretique*), but they were ready with arms, and, if circumstances required, with armies, men and horses in abundance (*prompta tamen omnibus arma ac, si res poscat, exercitus, plurimum virorum equorumque*).¹⁴ In this way, even though they kept the peace, their reputation did not suffer (*et quiescentibus eadem fama*). For the Cherusci, however, peace had lasted too long, had become enervating (*marcens*) and led to disaster (*ruina*). Having once been righteous and moderate (*olim boni aequique*), they had now lost their reputation and were described as indolent and stupid (*nunc inertes ac stulti*). Here, I think, is the message that Tacitus wanted to put over to his readers through the fortunes of the two

12 Much 413f. thinks that "bei dem schliesslichen Sieg der Chatten handelt es sich kaum um einen vorausgehenden Volkskrieg der beiden gesamten Stämme, sondern um das erfolgreiche und den chattischen Einfluss festigende Eingreifen zugunsten einer, und zwar der römferfeindlichen Partei."

13 Cf. Büchner, Stud. IV, 70 "die Friedfertigkeit der Cherusker wird im Kontrast zu der der Chauken gesehen, nicht etwa die Behandlung eines neuen Volkes um ihrer selbst willen begonnen". Ib. 74 n. 8 "Dass Tacitus die unfundierte Friedfertigkeit der Cherusker stärker hervorhebt, als es sich mit der Annalenstelle zu vertragen scheint, wird einmal darauf beruhen, dass die eigentlich historischen Studien manches neue Licht im einzelnen bringen mussten, zum ändern darauf, dass . . . der 'Frieden' der Cherusker der Kontrapost zu dem der Chauken ist."

14 With Anderson 169 I take *plurimum* to be in apposition to *exercitus* and regard *res poscat* (cf. Germ. 44,2 *ut res poscit*) as a regular formula. Büchner, Stud. IV, 70 translates "Wenn die Lage ein Heer fordert".

peoples: military readiness and a strong army must be maintained in all circumstances; it is by practising military training that a people can keep up its moral qualities of righteousness and moderation (cf. *iustitiā, non per iniurias, sine cupiditate, sine impotentia* about the Chauci, and *olim boni aequique* about the Cherusci); peace, when it lasts too long, is enervating and leads to moral and material disaster.

So far, I have left untouched the important passage *inter impotentes et validos falso quiescas: ubi manu agitur, modestia ac probitas nomine superioris sunt*. It is time to examine how these words fit with the interpretation given above of the general content of cc. 35—36. In the first part, the present conjunctive *quiescas* proves its general character, so that I translate it as "with lawlessness and strength on either side of you, devotion to peace is wrong-headed".¹⁵ I do not think it is necessary to connect the words *impotentes et validos* with any particular group, even with the Germanic world in general. It seems to me that Gudeman is right, when he says in his commentary *ad locum* that "es ist wahrscheinlicher, dass wir es hier nur mit einem allgemein gültigen Erfahrungssatz zu tun haben".¹⁶ In conformity with this interpretation, I also consider the following *ubi manu agitur* to be a general reference to the world where wars are constantly waged.¹⁷

Modestia ac probitas stand chiasmically to *boni aequique* (= *probi ac modesti*),¹⁸ the opposite of which is expressed through *inertes ac stulti*; the latter of the two adjectives is contrasted with the following *sapientia*. In Germ. 28,4 *inertia* is attributed to the Gauls, whose *segnitia* (= *inertia*) in Agr. 11,4 is derived from the enervating influence of leisure: *plus tamen ferociae Britannii praeferunt, ut quos nondum longa pax emollierit. nam Gallos quoque in bellis floruisse accepimus; mox segnitia cum otio intravit, amissa virtute pariter ac libertate. Segnitia cum otio* deprived the Gauls of their *virtus* and *libertas*; as to the Cherusci, *nimia ac marcens pax* made

15 Cf. the translation by M. Hutton in the Loeb Classical Library and Anderson 170.

16 Büchner, Stud. IV, 71 refers the words to the Chatti, Anderson 170, like Wolff (99ff.) before him, refers *impotentes* to the Chatti, *validos* to the Chauci.

17 In Agr. 9,2 the expression *manu agere* is used in reference to military jurisdiction: *credunt plerique militaribus ingeniis subtilitatem deesse, quia castrensis iurisdictio segura et obtusior ac plura manu agens calliditatem fori non exerceat*. As *castrensis iurisdictio* is called *manu agens*, *ubi manu agitur* might be understood as *ubi castrensis iurisdictio valet*, though this also leads to the more general idea of *ubi bella geruntur*, i.e. in this world of constant warfare. — Büchner takes the expression to be a reference to the Germanic world and explains (Stud. IV, 71): "Wir stellen weiter fest, dass die germanische Welt als ein Zustand des Faustrechts, eine Welt, in der die Gewalt alles ist, aufgefasst wird"; ib. 79 "Tacitus beobachtet offenbar mit einem besonderen Interesse die germanische Welt, in der unter den Stämmen nichts als die Kraft des Armes, . . . das Faustrecht gilt"; 81 "Die Welt des Faustrechtes, der reinen Machtausübung, das ist die thukydideische Welt und Weltansicht. Tacitus entdeckt sie in dem Gegeneinander der germanischen Stämme".

18 This is also the opinion of Büchner, Stud. IV, 72, and Anderson 170.

them lose their earlier *modestia ac probitas* (cf. *olim boni aequique*). It was war that had made it possible for the Gauls to maintain their *virtus*, for the Cherusci to remain *boni aequique*.

Nomine superioris is interpreted by Büchner as "im Namen des Überlegenen".¹⁹ In this I cannot but agree with him. But the meaning of *verbum existendi*, given by him for *sunt* ("gelten und existieren"), is unnecessary. I take *sunt* to be a mere copula and interpret *nomine superioris sunt* as "are in the name of the stronger", i.e. "are characteristics of him who keeps himself stronger than his enemies". *Nomine superioris sunt* is thus equivalent to *superioris sunt*, in which *superioris* is genetivus proprietatis. In my opinion, the sentence *modestia ac probitas nomine superioris sunt* simply means that *modestia* and *probitas* are characteristics of peoples that are not subject to the effeminating influences of a long peace, but by constant military exercise keep up their moral strength, remaining in all circumstances superior to their enemies.²⁰

A very close parallel to the idea illustrated by Tacitus through the fortunes of the Chauci and Cherusci is provided by Aristotle, who in his discussion of the proper aim of military training (Polit. 1334a) says: "Most military states remain safe while at war but perish when they have won themselves an empire; in peace-time they lose their keen temper like iron . . . it is proper for the state to be temperate, brave and enduring, since, as the proverb goes, there is no leisure for slaves, but people unable to face danger bravely are the slaves of their assailants . . . war compels men to be just and temperate (ὁ μὲν γὰρ πόλεμος ἀναγκάζει δικαίους εἶναι καὶ σωφρονεῖν),²¹ whereas the enjoyment of prosperity and peaceful leisure tend to make them insolent."

The reputation that the Chauci enjoyed even when they kept the peace was that of justice and temperance, the two qualities that Aristotle saw as a consequence of warfare. Keeping up a strong army, they were a military nation which even in time of peace did not indulge in the excessive leisure that — according to Aristotle — tended to make men insolent. We are told just the opposite about the Cherusci by Tacitus: excessive leisure had made them unable to face danger bravely, so that they had been defeated by their assailants.

19 Stud. IV, 76ff.

20 The interpretation of Büchner (Stud. IV, 76) is: "Beherrschung und Rechtschaffenheit gelten und existieren im Namen des Überlegenen" and (78) "die sittlichen Werte — fassen wir einmal *probitas* und *modestia* so zusammen — sind garantiert durch den Überlegenen, haben ihre Existenz nicht in sich, sondern sind positiv oder negativ bezogen auf den, der ihre Zerstörer in Schacht halten kann". He also says (74): "Eroberer können nie und niemals *modesti et probi* genannt werden"; they can not be called so by a pacifist, it is true, but as made by one who is an imperialistic militarist and idealizes war, this kind of statement is natural.

21 Cf. Cic. Tusc. 3,16 *temperans* — *quem Graeci σώφρονα appellant eamque virtutem σωφροσύνην vocant, quam soleo equidem tum temperantiam, tum moderationem appellare, non numquam etiam modestiam.*