

The HARLAN J. BERK SAVINGS BOND Contest

SENIOR – Joe T. 1st place Winner \$2000 Savings Bond recipient
532 – Wellington School, Columbus OH - Teacher Susan Bonvallet.

Unflinching Hand

(chosen coin, denarius minted by Otho)

<http://www.harlanjberk.com/currentbbs/details.asp?inventorynumber=44804&inventorygroup=cc&ask=otho+denarius&file=/search.asp>

When civil war in the balance lay, and mincing Otho might have won the day, bloodshed too costly did he spare his land, and pierced heart with an unflinching hand. Caesar to Cato yields, while both drew breath: greater than both is Otho in his death.

- Martial *Epigrams* VI. 32

“The battle has been lost.” The words came to Otho’s ear almost as a whisper, so weakened was the young soldier’s voice. He tore his eyes away as the boy’s body was wracked by painful fits, coughing up a nauseating mixture of blood and mucus. Tears welled behind the boy’s eyes and flowed down his young features like a river. The boy looked as if he had seen no more than 18 winters, too young to be choking back the pain of wounds won in battle.

“Do not cry, my son,” Otho said in a comforting voice. “One day your wounds will become scars - scars bearing stories that your children will ask you to tell again and again as you grow old and happy with all the pleasures earned of a good life. You have done your duty to Rome and to me; you have your honor. Now rest soundly; let your wounds heal.”

The boy nodded and lay back down. Otho rose and left him to his attendants, though it would do no good. The boy would be lucky to see the morning. How many more tears must fall before peace is found, he wondered. How many wives must lose a husband, how many mothers a son, how many sisters a brother? How many lovers must be heart broken?

Otho exited the tent into the cool April morning and paused to inhale the fresh air. For a moment it rejuvenated his spirits, let his hopes of a better tomorrow take flight on the sweet breeze. If fortune favored him this day and his armies gained him victory, he solely would rule, the mighty Emperor of a great nation. But his dreams were quickly subdued as several of his Praetorian Guard flanked him on all sides. Though their loyalty eased his weary heart, their presence brought to mind the tumultuous nature of his short rule manifested now in the forms of broken soldiers hobbling into the town with their last reserves of strength. There were many - he only hoped that there were not too many. These thoughts dragged on in his mind as he made his slow way back to his quarters, his pace fettered by his heavy heart.

Upon entering, Otho bid his servants to leave him in peace. The room was plain and ordinary in every sense; lacking even windows, the room was lit by candles day and night. Nor did the furnishings of the room befit those of an Emperor as much as a general on the move. A wooden desk for writing and planning, the top of which was occupied by haphazardly strewn maps and charts, rested in the near corner. A small bed ran along the opposite wall, its only redeeming quality being its simple design for functionality - in which respect, Otho felt, it succeeded surprisingly well. He collapsed into the chair with a sigh. Listlessly his eyes

wandered over the maps and charts covering the desk. The wavering light of the candles melded the familiar valleys, cities, and regions into a strange and ominous country full of pitfalls and shadows concealing the menacing forms of his enemies, who lay and waited in the shadows, biding their time. Angrily he swept his arm across the table, spraying charts and maps into the air and in one fell swoop wiping the shadow country into oblivion.

In disgust Otho stood up and paced back and forth across the room, long strides angrily barred by clinical walls, thoughts checked by the confining room. Surrendering his will, he resolved to pick up the papers scattered across the floor. Bending down to pick up the first, he paused as the glint of silver caught his eye amongst the disheveled sheets. Slowly he reached down and pushed aside a map of the Po River, revealing the entirety of a denarius.

For a moment Otho stared down at the coin, stared down at himself. He did not comprehend what he saw, his mind so far removed. Slowly the first thoughts welled out of his mind. Had it really been so long ago that he had been made Emperor that they now minted coins after his own image? It seemed only yesterday that he had commissioned the coin. What was it now, April? Three months gone since that day, the day the head of his former friend and Emperor, Galba, lay at his feet. Without realizing it, he had picked the coin up and had begun to twirl it between his fingers. Holding it now between thumb and forefinger, he saw the reverse glow in the light of the candles. The figure of Securitas, goddess of security and stability, holding a wreath and scepter and standing erect, glittered in the dim light. Looking at her, he seemed to see a judge passing sentence, condemning his rule as hypocrisy.

“Were my dreams so unjust, was I not meant to lead this nation? I have begged the gods to hear my prayers; I have wanted nothing but your blessing.” Securitas remained unchanged, poised and reproachful. Indeed in this moment the notion of using the goddess of security and stability to define his rule seemed to him a mockery. In his time he had seen almost nothing but controversy and suspicion.

The manner of his coming to power was far from peaceful, he knew. He had taken his office by force and by the apathetic nature of the masses, not by any election or favored appointment. Though he had done his best to appease the whims of Galba, Galba had nevertheless adopted Piso, making him Caesar. How deep that betrayal had cut him – years of faithful service and in the end all for naught! Galba had left him no choice but to conspire with the Praetorians and take Rome by force; in the end Galba was his own undoing. By nightfall the heads of both Galba and Piso were presented to him. At the time he had been so sure that on that day the gods had favored him; even the soothsayer of Galba had not predicted the trouble ahead. It was clear that it was the will of the gods that he, Otho, should be Caesar. The memories flashed by as if in a storm. “Why would have you sent me the signs if I was not destined to rule, he asked the empty room. “Was I so wrong in my interpretation, blinded by desire of rule?”

Otho stared at the coin in his open palm, rolling it over and over again, as if searching for some answer hidden within. He remembered that he had hoped to bring a new era to Rome, a time of peace and prosperity under his rule. There was no doubt in his mind of his capabilities; he had governed before, and well, in Lusitania when he had been banished for his love of Nero’s mistress, Poppaea. For a moment Otho was overcome by the memory of her beauty and the short time they had together. Instead of wasting away, Otho swore that he would use this opportunity to become the man that his father had always wanted him to be and give up the eccentric ways of his youth and friendship with Nero. His father had taught him not to give into the temptations and degradations of opulence, but to rule justly and with fairness, and so he had.

Eased by these fond memories, Otho placed the coin on his desk and picked up the rest of the papers strewn across the room. Sitting back down in his chair, he once again paused to consider the coin and his life. He was filled with the memories of his early days of rule; he had

hoped to conciliate his adversaries and, in so doing, to restore political stability to the Empire. However, he reflected with a small grimace, he was never able to fully win over the confidence of his adversaries, and the manner of his coming to power had disturbed the populace of Rome and the Senate. Tensions were so high in Rome, that at one time the Praetorians mistakenly thought that the senators had staged a coup to overthrow him and stormed the imperial palace, much to his surprise and that of his senatorial dinner guest. It took much pleading and even tears on his part to reassure and pacify the Praetorian mob, though he was greatly honored by their fierce loyalty and saw to it that they were well compensated. However, the memory now only underscored the unease beneath the stability of the Empire and the bitter irony of Securitas' figure, which seemed to blame him. . . .

He had inherited another evil of Galba's rule - Aulus Vitellius. The memory of the name made Otho's blood burn with hatred; the soldiers in Germany swore their allegiance to Vitellius and declared that it was he who was emperor. Otho remembered that for a time it looked as if his entreaties for peace might well have ended without bloodshed; however his correspondence with Vitellius quickly turned sour with the exchange of harsh words. Perhaps, he thought, if I had not be so quick to defend his honor, we would not be fighting here today. Those were only dreams he reminded himself; at the time he had done what he thought best. Thus, knowing war was imminent, he had summoned all the legions that supported him back to Italy with the greatest speed. However, they were long in coming, and he found himself outnumbered as Vitellius's forces crossed the Alps. The day that word of the advancing armies came, he resolved to attack in quick diversionary strikes, to try and buy time for reinforcements to arrive. The plan worked relatively well until a few days ago when word came that Vitellius was building a bridge across the Po.

At Bedriacum, Otho remembered, he had called a war council to decide what action should be taken. His advisers warned him that he should not engage Vitellius and that every day delayed on their part would give more time for the forces from Moesia and Pannonia to join them. Time would hurt the forces of Vitellius, who were far from home, in enemy territory, and strained for supplies and other necessities. However, he had not followed their advice. The men were becoming restless with desire of battle; and perhaps out of his own lack of fortitude, he had given into the urgings of his men and decided to launch a counterattack against Vitellius.

"Oh, how far my dreams have fallen," he lamented. The battle had been joined with Vitellius earlier this morning. At first there were only rumors of the struggle trickling in, but soon the injured found their way to the town, and the ominous rumors were confirmed. As far as Otho understood, Vitellius's forces had ambushed his men as they marched in formation among the carts and merchants that always accompanied an army. Panic grabbed the crowd as Vitellius's forces bore down on the unprepared army. The report from the injured suggested that, indeed, the forces loyal to him had fought in pitched skirmishes but few had been able to regroup and join the battle in force.

Otho knew that his advisers had thought his plan reckless, and it had proved to be. Like a man with eyes closed, he had stepped from the ledge, giving his fortunes to chance. How many men had died today because of his lack of fortitude, he wondered despairingly.

Looking back down at the coin in his hand, Otho resolved his spirit. His hopes and dreams would not die in vain; Rome would see its great age of peace once again! After this day no longer would Romans fight against other Romans, even if it meant that he should die. He swore to Securitas that history would not remember him as a mockery. Though they might judge his life with disdain, no other would have the equal of his honor in death. He would set things right, free his servants from bondage, and ask the soldiers to hold no grudge against Vitellius - for the good of Rome.

There was a knock at the door, and through it Otho heard the muffled voice of his most trusted servant. "Sir, urgent news. I must speak to you!"

"Come in," he beckoned. "You will find the door is not locked."

Hurriedly, his servant ducked into the room, his cheeks flushed with adrenaline. When he spoke, his words came quickly between his gasping breaths. "Sir, the soldiers have come in mass to the city. The battle is over, and Vitellius has taken the field. The soldiers and the people cry out to hear from their Caesar. You must go to them."

With quiet dignity and a calm mind, Otho rose and walked out the door to speak to his people - and to meet his fate. The roar of the crowd was deafening, thousands of soldiers and town citizens spread out in all directions. Their forces had suffered an enormous defeat at the hand of the armies of Vitellius, but they did not cry with rage or sorrow, but with admiration and devotion to Otho. Those nearest to their leader bowed down in honor to him. Others reached out to touch him, and those who could not see him fought for the highest perches that they could. Notwithstanding this, Otho stood serene and unshaken, and with his face full of constancy and composure, he spoke to the crowd.

"This day, my fellow-soldiers, which gives me such proofs of your affection, is preferable even to that day on which you saluted me emperor. Deny me not, therefore, the yet higher satisfaction of laying down my life for the preservation of so many brave men; in this, at least, let me be worthy of the empire, that is, to die for it. I am of the opinion the enemy has neither gained an entire nor a decisive victory. I have advice that the Moesian army is not many days' journey distant. But alas, it is not in defense of Italy against Hannibal or Pyrrhus or the Cimbri that we fight, but Romans combining against Romans. Whether we conquer or are defeated, the country suffers and we commit a crime. Victory, to whichever side it falls, is gained at her expense. I can die with more honor than I can reign. For I cannot see at all how I should do as great good to my country by gaining the victory, as I shall by dying to establish peace and unanimity and to save Italy from another such unhappy day."

As soon as he had finished, he was resolved against all argument or persuasion. Otho took leave of all that were present and bade them to depart. With honor and dignity, he settled his last affairs and obligations. That night Otho asked his servants for two sharp daggers and choose the sharper of the two. It is believed that he slept soundly that last night, and in the morning he was found dead in his chambers with only a single wound. His body was carried out in a grand procession, and as it passed all present fell to knees bowing in respect to the sacrifice that Otho had given. A great pyre was constructed for him to be burned upon. As the great flames roared, the embers caught upon the wind and carried Otho's dream of *Securitas* to the heavens. And so passed the reign of Otho, who in his death held more honor than all.

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