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Burying Varus' Legions

In A.D. 9, Germanicus Caesar's army buried the remains of the army of Quinctilius Varus, massacred in the Teutoburger Wald six years before. This event is only described in detail by Tacitus (*Annals* 1.61-2). The soldiers react to the horrifying battlefield; their reconstruction of the battle through physical remains and the accounts of survivors serves as a flashback to an event outside the chronological limits of the *Annals*. The aim of this paper is to interpret this remarkable passage through its intertextuality. I examine both the use of 'sources' in the construction of Tacitus' narrative, and the possible effects of 'allusion' on readers' interpretation.

A fine article by Woodman (1979) has established the dependency of this passage, both structurally and verbally, on Tacitus' earlier work, the *Histories* (2.70). In A.D. 69, Vitellius visits the battlefield of Bedriacum and, even though the ground is still ominously strewn with rotting flesh, crowns over his recent civil-war victory. Woodman argues that Tacitus elaborated the basic facts (such as are preserved in Suetonius and Dio), while redeploying his own narrative in the *Histories* of the more recent and better attested battlefield visit of Vitellius. This process of 'substantive imitation' (examples of which could be multiplied) has important implications for the veracity of the *Annals*, and supports Woodman's well-known views on the aesthetic and purpose of Classical historiography. But how do the cases of Germanicus and Vitellius interact? Is the relationship meaningful as well as functional?

This paper looks at how the contrasts between the two passages affect the interpretation of the *Annals*. The landscape of the forest is confusing and uninterpretable compared to suburban Bedriacum; the dense Vergilian allusions create an intertextual dark wood rather than casting light. The passage of time-- six years against 40 days at Bedriacum - has left bare, unrecognisable bones rather than stinking flesh. Far more than Bedriacum, the *Clades Variana* is an important and debatable exemplum, the interpretation of which concerns-- and eludes-- all the characters in Tacitus' narrative of the war of AD 15: it soon turns out that Germanicus' pious attempt at achieving closure is an emotional *and* literary failure. Both passages are, in a sense, meta-historical: they show characters reconstructing the past, and the problems with such reconstructions. In the *Histories*, a mere forty days after the battle, the tribunes and prefects are already each exalting their own deeds, mixing falsehoods with truths and exaggerations (language characteristic of historiography). In the *Annals*, the soldiers' eyes pass over the battlefield while they reconstruct (in chronological order), the events of the battle, in a way that mimics the historian's *exaedificatio* of his narrative from the bare foundations. But their ability to interpret is limited-- as is signalled by the way they bury the bones without recognition, or the fragmentary and syntactically loose testimony of the survivors. The viewers' failure of understanding of the past here is of a piece with my interpretation of the Teutoburger Wald as a hazy landscape, an uninterpretable and uncontrollable exemplum, and an intertextual jungle.