

In *Annales* I.61, Tacitus describes one of the most vivid, horrifying scenes in all of Roman history: Germanicus and his soldiers visit the spot where some 17,000 of their countrymen and their leader, Varus, were slaughtered by the Germans. They can still see the lines of Varus' camp, the piles of bones where the Romans made a stand, their scattered remains where they fled. Survivors of the battle come forward to explicate the devastation, reliving the nightmare of death and humiliation.

I argue that Tacitus blurs the boundaries between visual and literary commemoration in the Teutoburg episode by treating the scene as a work of visual art and using the conventions of artistic ecphrasis to memorialize it in literature. One of the reasons this passage is so arresting is that the historian has chosen to commemorate an act of commemoration; that is, Tacitus is memorializing in his history a group of men who are, in turn, memorializing their fallen comrades through the physical act of burial. This close connection between physical *monumenta*, such as tombs and *imagines*, and the literary *monumenta* of the historian is one that Tacitus often highlights in his historical works. The Teutoburg ecphrasis, simultaneously visual and literary, focuses attention on this double meaning of *monumentum*.

The text of the Teutoburg episode is full of the language of visual art, designed to draw our attention to a tragedy carved into the earth itself. Phrases such as “*visuque ac memoria deformis*” (“ugly in sight and memory”), “*manus ostentabant*” (“[the outline of the camp] betrayed the hands [of the legions]”), and the deictic pronouns “*hic*” and “*illinc*” encourage us to read the scene as a work of art. Furthermore, the scene contains both “imminent quickening” and “timeless striving,” two critical elements in George Kurman's definition of epic ecphrasis (Kurman 1974). Kurman uses the term “imminent quickening” to describe the way figures in a work of art seem to spring to life. In chapter 61, Tacitus uses the temporal markers *prima* and *dein* not only to indicate the viewers' progress through the wreckage, but also the chronology of the battle itself. The skeletal figures are suddenly full of action, as the soldiers see where they fled (“*fugerant*”) and where they made a stand (“*restiterant*”). “Timeless striving” refers to the effect of freezing the figures and the scene itself in time, such that the actions in which the figures are engaged never reach their fulfillment. The markings of the camp seem virtually carved into the ground, the bones of the soldiers frozen in the final, unrealized acts of their lives. Indeed, this contrast between the frenetic activity in the imaginations of Germanicus' men and the static permanence of death make the scene all the more striking and unsettling.

All of these ecphrastic elements encourage Tacitus' readers to *view* this traumatic event in his history, just as they might *view* the monument to the dead constructed by Germanicus and his men. Going well beyond mere *enargeia*, digression, or “tragic history,” Tacitus' ecphrastic *monumentum* blurs the distinctions between literary and artistic forms of commemoration, forging a devastating memory not soon forgotten by the reader.