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Barbarian Women at War in the Works of Tacitus

In Rome, only as a victim of war could a woman be excused for becoming directly involved in military affairs; such interference invariably leads to disaster and the breakdown of military discipline. Nonetheless, the works of Tacitus contain many examples of women at war. Though most of these are "barbarian" women, Tacitus' portrayal of these figures serves to provide insight into his view of the character of Romans of both sexes, and of the state of the empire as a whole.

Barbarian women participate in war unwillingly, as hostages or, when (as often happens) the Roman army chooses to show no pity, as casualties (so Germanicus' army: *non sexus, non aetas miserationem attulit*, *Ann*. 1.51, or Suetonius Paulinus' forces in the defeat of Boudicca at *Ann*. 14.37; in the sack of Cremona by Vespasian's forces one sees the same merciless treatment of other Romans, *Hist*. 3.33). Barbarian women also participate willingly: most often as hortamenta victoriae (*Hist*. 4.18) behind the lines, begging the men to save them from the terrors of captivity, or offering reproof for cowardice. This motif is so common in Tacitus that women are invoked by barbarian leaders even when absent—and this motivation for battle is often explicitly contrasted with that of the Romans (e.g., in the speech of Calgacus, *Agr*. 32.2). Finally, barbarian women fight in the front lines—like the Germanic women of *Ger*. 18—or even lead men in combat like Boudicca. This is such a bizarre concept for the Roman reader that Tacitus has Boudicca stress the fact that Britons often fought under the leadership of women (*Ann*. 14.35; cf. *Agr*. 16.1)—in a speech addressed to Britons, who would conceivably not need the reminder. Roman women in Tacitus also become involved in battle: e.g., the women at Cremona, aiding the Vitellians *studio partium* (*Hist*. 3.32), or Verulana Gratilla at the siege of the Capitol, drawn by the attractions of war itself (3.69). But this, it seems, is in Tacitus only possible in the madness of civil war, when societal values no longer hold (a point already made by A.J. Marshall in "Ladies in Waiting," 1984). Such women have become barbaric, like Vitellius' wife Triaria, armed with a sword, alleged to have found in the capture of Tarracina an apparently suitable outlet for her cruelty (3.77).

This paper will investigate several passages in Tacitus where women are involved in war, looking for shared motifs, stereotypes, and recurring vocabulary; comparison will be made, where appropriate, with other ancient sources. Such passages fall roughly into four main categories: those where women are victims of war, those in which women give encouragement in war or are even a cause of war themselves, those in which women actually fight, and those where women stay out of battle but influence or even seek to control military affairs. In the first three categories, barbarian women predominate. The fourth is largely the domain of "bad," or at least problematic, Roman women like the notorious Plancina, wife of Cn. Piso, or the two Agrippinas, but in the barbarian world they have their counterpart in Veleda, the Germanic prophetess revered by the participants in Civilis' Gallo-Germanic revolt against Rome—although not so revered as to prevent some war-weary Batavians from suspecting that Roman emperors might make better leaders than Germanic women (*Hist*. 5.24). As in Boudicca's speech, a Roman sentiment is reinforced by placing it in a barbarian mouth where it does not necessarily

fit, underscoring the unnaturalness of women's becoming entangled in warfare. Roman women who intrude into the masculine military sphere are thus behaving like barbarians.

Tacitean stereotypes of barbarian women at war color the reader's perceptions of Roman women (and men) and, ultimately, the institution of the Principate itself. The developing picture suggests a world where norms of civilized behavior are breaking down.