
The first three Books of Tacitus’s *Histories* cover the single year 69 AD, one of the most confused and violent Rome would ever see. For a Roman historian to devote so much space to so short a period of time is without precedent. Modern historians are therefore unusually well informed about that year, with additional details surviving in the works of Suetonius, Plutarch, Josephus and Cassius Dio. It was a time that cannot be understood solely in terms of what was happening in Rome, or in terms of the lives and personalities of the emperors. Separate rebellions flared up in all parts of the empire, many of them overlapping with one another; and there were conflicts not only between armies and armies but between armies and civilians, between armies and their own commanders and between the commanders and their superiors. Ash’s book is a stimulating historiographical study of the Tacitean account, focused on the historian’s characterisation first of the various armies engaged in the civil war and secondly of the leaders, especially Galba, Otho, Vitellius, Vespasian and his sons, and Antonius Primus. Her first chapter will also be of considerable interest to anyone studying the earlier civil war between Caesar and Pompey, for there she examines the historiographical record of that struggle to the extent that it established models for what was expected in subsequent civil war narratives.

Comparison and allusion are the key weapons in Ash’s critical arsenal. She uses them with telling accuracy. Unlike many modern commentators upon the period who seek to produce a composite account which combines, and attempts to reconcile, the various surviving sources, Ash is at pains to highlight the distinctiveness of Tacitus and to draw attention to unique Tacitean emphases that have often been overlooked. On the motives of the Flavian troops she demonstrates a major gulf between the impression given by Tacitus and that conveyed by Josephus (57). She
proves Tacitus' portrayal of the ‘collective identities’ of the armies she proves to be far more discriminating than Plutarch’s which ‘tends to elide the differences between the civil war armies’ (23). Tacitus' Vitellius is shown to be characterised in a way that does not comply with the stereotype of the tyrant evident in the other sources (112).

Some of Ash’s fruitful comparisons are more historical than historiographical: between the position of Primus under Vespasian and that of Agrippa under Augustus (164-165); between the military and political situation after the death of Nero and that after the death of Domitian (167-169). Among the allusions to which Ash draws attention, the following are particularly instructive. Tacitus’ account of the Vitellian army, as she sees it, recalls the description of the Gauls in Livy’s fifth Book. On the other hand the depiction of the Flavian troops is designed to remind the reader of Hannibal’s Carthaginian army. The death of Galba carries echoes of the famous murders of Priam, Servius Tullius and Pompey. A wrestling match between two soldiers of the Fifth Legion that degenerates into a brawl (Hist. 2.68) carries reminiscences of the single combat between Torquatus and the giant Gaul as recorded by Livy and earlier by Quadrigarius. Sallust’s scene where Micipsa addresses Adherbal, Hiempsal and Jugurtha is argued to be the literary model behind Tacitus’ presentation of Vespasian and his sons. Likewise there are suggestions of the relationship between Marius and Sulla, as sketched by Sallust, in Tacitus’ treatment of the rivalry between Titus and Domitian. In addition to intertextuality Ash sees a rich web of intratextuality, by which passages of the Histories interconnect with other passages, such as, for instance, Primus’ speech at 3.2 which revisits the themes of an earlier speech by Suetonius Paulinus at 2.32. One of the more interesting ideas Ash posits is that Tacitus may have been influenced by Silius Italicus’ Puncia; she finds several suggestive links between the Histories and Silius’ epic poem (63, 81, 115). Since Silius took part in the war of 69, this may lend itself to further investigation.

If there is a problem with the book, it is that Ash finds so many allusions that they start to get in one another’s way. Is Domitian like Jugurtha or Sulla or both? Ash separates too neatly her analyses of, on the one hand, the armies and, on the other, the leaders. Vitellius’ army is likened to the Gauls descending on Rome in 390 BC, but no attempt is made to reconcile this with the characterisation of Vitellius himself. In
fact an obvious link could have been drawn between the greater passivity of Vitellius in the Histories than in the other sources and the ‘Vitellians as Gauls’ analogy, in that Tacitus may have wanted to remove an emphasis on the leader so as to play up the impression of an uncontrolled marauding horde. Some allusions, plausible in isolation, become confusing when looked at in conjunction with others. The Flavian army as it advances on Italy resembles Hannibal’s; but Antonius Primus, its leader, we are told elsewhere (147, 157), is meant to remind us of Marius! The allusions Ash discovers work in isolation, but in their very multiplicity and range they risk driving Tacitus’ overall historical conception towards incoherence.

And the coherence of Tacitus’ characterisations is one of Ash’s main themes. She mounts an effective defence of Tacitus against those who claim he has presented inconsistent portraits of some of the leaders of 69, most notably Otho and Primus. In both cases her argument is persuasive. So too is her unravelling of the various subtle means by which Tacitus inserts criticisms of the Flavians (the troops, Vespasian and his sons and their propagandists) into the narrative of their victory. ‘The prime quality of Cornelius Tacitus’, wrote Syme (Tacitus, 398), ‘is distrust. It was needed, if a man were to write about the Caesars’. Alongside its exploration of the literary texture of the Histories this book elucidates new facets of Tacitean distrust.

An encounter with Ash’s interpretation will enrich anyone’s experience of reading Tacitus’ Histories. Her book deserves a place in the bibliography of every scholar working on Tacitus and every historian working on the civil war of 69 or on the dynasty of the Flavians.

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