

Bookish Generals and the Veracity of Historical Writing:  
Allusion and Ethnographic Knowledge in Tacitus' *Histories*

Recent scholarship has put the spotlight on the phenomenon of self-imitation in Tacitus (ten Berge 2023; cf. Woodman 1979; Goodyear 1981, 90). That an author will recall his earlier work is perfectly natural. But Tacitus, in addition to referring to relevant passages in his earlier texts, also attributes such allusions to historical characters in his narrative, a practice that raises problems. Although ancient historians, Tacitus included, often illustrate how characters engage in meta-reflections on the nature of power (Rutherford 2010; Adler 2011), or mirror the historian's own methods of inquiry (e.g., Herodotus describing non-Greek kings as inquirers and investigators: Christ 1994), it is striking that Tacitus has some of his characters mimic his *own* knowledge, as this establishes a false or fictitious scenario in which individuals who could not have read his works are described as having done exactly that.

I present five short examples of this phenomenon from Tacitus' extant *Histories*: the Othonian general Suetonius Paulinus, who is made to recall geographical and ethnographic information from the *Germania* to argue for delaying battle against the Vitellians; the Flavian general Antonius Primus, who refers to information in the *Germania* and earlier sections of the *Histories* to advocate for immediate invasion of Italy and engagement with the Vitellians; and Vespasian's chief advisor Mucianus, who refers to the *Agricola*, the *Germania*, and the *Histories* to urge Vespasian to make his imperial bid and to take on Vitellius. The other side of the coin is presented by Vitellius and his generals, who are described as lacking historical awareness and ethnographic knowledge or as entertaining plainly erroneous information. What emerges from these examples is that, on Tacitus' account, geographical, ethnographic, and historical knowledge and inquiry are key ingredients in good generalship and military strategizing, and one way in

which this is reflected is in his characters' references to his earlier texts. Interestingly, some non-Roman generals are described with the same technique. So, as my final example shows, Tacitus ascribes references to the *Germania* and possibly even the *Dialogus* to the Treviran chieftain Tutor, whose arguments in favor of immediate action during the Batavian Revolt are largely borne out by subsequent events (ten Berge 2023, 278–80). While the idea of Roman generals (not) reading a Roman author's texts is within the realm of the conceivable/possible, the notion that foreign chiefs did so is inconceivable and raises questions about Tacitus' work and ancient historiography more broadly.

The above technique is an aspect of Tacitus' historical method that has gone largely unnoticed, both in the standard commentaries and in book length studies (for the *Histories*: Ash 1999; Sailor 2008; Joseph 2012; Master 2016), and for good reason given its peculiar implications: it not only serves as (a somewhat surreptitious) way for Tacitus to underline, intertextually, that *his* way of conceptualizing the world is the correct one, but also demands that readers suspend their disbelief and in effect commits historical falsehoods. This raises concerns about what is deemed acceptable in a genre committed to transmitting the truth and in the work of an author who explicitly avows objectivity, particularly since that author plainly means for us to pick up on this technique.

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