

Expiating Mutiny with Sacrilege: The Cost of Roman Order in Tacitus *Annals* 1.49–51

Following the death of Augustus, Germanicus is confronted with a mutiny of Roman soldiers stationed along the Rhine frontier. Through appeals and concessions, he brings the soldiers back under his control. The narrative of the mutiny (Tac. *Ann.* 1.31–45, 48–49) has received attention from a variety of angles (e.g., literary aspects [Woodman 2006], religion [Shannon-Henderson 2019, 69–79], and failures of leadership [Stoll 2019, 252–53]). In this talk, I focus on the aftermath of the event, which offers a chilling coda that asks readers to ponder the cost of Roman internal order, especially when read in dialogue with passages from other authors.

After the ringleaders of the mutiny have been killed by their fellow soldiers, Germanicus determines to restore the unity of his troops by leading them against the enemy. He therefore orders them to attack Germanic tribespeople who have gathered at a sanctuary of the goddess Tanfana to celebrate a festival. Slaughter and the destruction of the sacred space ensue. The elated soldiers recommit to the Roman cause.

I start with an analysis of the religious language of the passage, which presents both the massacre of the mutineers and the attack on the festival as deeply problematic. While the offense against the goddess has no immediate adverse consequences (unlike, e.g., the destruction of a sanctuary of Jupiter Urios in Cic. *Pis.* 85), Tacitus shows that the success of the operation is based on not just accepting sacrilege, but celebrating it as a morale boost for Roman troops.

Next, I consider the passage intertextually. Scenes in which soldiers massacre unprepared enemies are not uncommon in Roman literature. I focus on two episodes that, in my view, provide especially rich parallels to Tacitus' account. The first is Caes. *BG* 1.49–53. Caesar learns that the Germans will not meet him in open battle because they have received unfavorable

omens. He attacks anyway, but, unlike Germanicus, does not surprise them. Instead, he slowly and methodically gets his troops ready until the Germans realize that they have no choice and must set aside their religious compunctions. Caesar therefore provides a template for how to exploit the enemy's religious beliefs in warfare while still adhering to the proper rules of combat. The second passage is Livy 25.38–39. After the Romans have suffered severe losses against the Carthaginians in Spain, a man named L. Marcius takes charge of the troops and, in a speech replete with religious language, lays out his plans for revenge: the Roman soldiers will attack the Carthaginian camp at night. While the operation is a success, Livy leaves the reader with the strong sense that it was improper. Real Roman soldiers do not massacre their enemies in their sleep. The Romans did things *Punica arte*. By also attacking a sanctuary, Tacitus' Germanicus does even worse than this.

Caesar and Livy point to larger questions that Tacitus' account of the aftermath of the mutiny raises about the nature of Roman rule and the consequences that it has both for the enemies of Rome and for the Romans themselves. It has long been recognized that Tacitus uses the words and actions of Rome's enemies to critique internal corruption and depravity (e.g., Benario 1968 and 1994). Germanicus' attack on the festival presents the reader with an unparalleled scene of Roman violence against a passive enemy who clearly expected higher ethical standards from a Roman army.

Bibliography

- Benario, H. W. 1968. "Tacitus and the Fall of the Roman Empire." *Historia* 17: 37–50.
Benario, H. W. 1994. "Tacitus and *commotus* in *Ann.* 13.56." *Historia* 43: 252–58.
Shannon-Henderson, K. 2019. *Religion and Memory in Tacitus' Annals*. Oxford.
Stoll, O. 2019. *Vestigia Cladis. Roms Umgang mit militärischem Misserfolg*. Berlin.
Woodman, A. J. 2006. "Mutiny and Madness: Tacitus *Annals* 1.16–49." *Arethusa* 39: 303–29.