

The Pursuit as Closure in Set-Piece Battles in Caesar and Tacitus

The Roman army excelled in set-piece battles. The most desirable outcome of these devastating encounters was not a retreating foe, but a routed one *in fuga*. A mark of Roman warfare was the rigorous pursuit of a routed enemy (Goldsworthy 1996 166). Breaking an army was normally a prelude to its nation's surrender, which brought glory to the *imperator* who achieved such a victory. Given the pursuit's significance, can we detect narrative patterns and rhetorical uses of this crucial phase? Ash has shown how Tacitus elaborates a battle between Roman allies and Parthians (*Ann.* 6.34-35), and then sours the "Roman" victory by various means including lack of a closure (1999 128). We need to distinguish between the closures of the battle and the campaign. I argue that in many literary accounts the pursuit functions as the closure for set-piece battles, providing transition from combat to aftermath and exercising a powerful rhetorical effect that conveys the totality and vigor of battle. As case studies, I examine set-piece battles in Caesar's *Gallic War* and Tacitus' *Agricola* and *Annals*.

Roman presentations of set-piece battles have narrative patterns that constitute a framework adaptable for specific aims. This is similar to Homeric type-scenes, which also follow narratives with a relatively basic model (Clark 2004 134f.). The pursuit, i.e. the closing stage of combat, is exemplary with patterns in vocabulary, order, space, and time. Caesar and Tacitus consistently describe rout with *fuga*, or by idiom such as *terga vertere*, which follows the turn of battle when one side has admitted defeat; the latter in turn is often juxtaposed to panic. Pursuits are often curtailed or halted by difficult terrain, nightfall, or exhaustion. Tacitus expresses the pursuit with greater variety but within the same framework; Caesar regularly uses forms of *sequor*, especially *consequor*, an exactness that reflects his deceptive plainness (Batstone 1991 126).

Having identified narrative patterns, I discuss how these authors rhetorically use the pursuit as closure. For Caesar, I examine Bibracte, Sambre, and Alesia, and for Tacitus, the battles of Mons Graupius and various ones in the *Annals*. The best outcome was a routed enemy, but not every battle ended so decisively. They describe the pursuit directly or indirectly, whether it was successful or not, and it is artfully conspicuous in its rare absence. For example, Caesar transitions abruptly from the Nervii's last stand in this "proper field of *virtus*" to a brief statement of their near annihilation (Brown 1999 335). The lack of a pursuit leaves the impression that no enemy turned his back (2.27-28). At Alesia, Caesar claims that were it not for such a taxing battle his pursuit would have exterminated the enemy (7.88). Caesar conveys glorious contests against brave enemies. Tacitus's accounts often leave a different impression. He slants his narratives to convey easy victories (Levene 2009 229f.). More disturbing perhaps is how frequently commanders are denied their due laurels. Tacitus often undercuts a successful pursuit by a sordid aftermath. For example, Tacitus praises Paulinus's illustrious rout of Boudicca, but immediately deflates it with a suicide of a commander who had denied his men a share in the glory; moreover, Paulinus soon becomes the victim of jealous rumor and is unceremoniously removed (*Ann.* 14.37-39).

Every culture develops their own way of discussing battle, and there is no perfect style that suites every author's purpose (Lendon 1999 274ff.). Riggsby notes that a discourse, on military tactics for instance, can cross genres and is ultimately "subject to a producer's conscious control" (2006 4). With Caesar and Tacitus, we see two authors defining the realm of battle within a recognizable framework. Compared to the decisiveness and glory of Caesar's battles, we have a context for the words that Tacitus ascribes to the old-fashioned Corbulo: "Happy the Roman commanders before my time" (*Ann.* 11.20.1).

Bibliography

- Ash, R. "An Exemplary Conflict: Tacitus' Parthian Battle Narrative ("Annals" 6.34-35)." *Phoenix*, 53, no. 1/2 (1999): 114-135.
- Batstone, W. W. "A Narrative Gestalt and the Force of Caesar's Style." *Mnemosyne* 44, no. 1/2 (1991): 126-136.
- Brown, R. D. "Two Caesarian Battle-Descriptions: A Study in Contrast." *The Classical Journal* 94, no. 4 (1999): 329-357.
- Clark, M. "Formulas, metre and type-scenes." *The Cambridge Companion to Homer*, edited by R. Fowler, 117-138. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004.
- Goldsworthy, A. *The Roman Army at War 100 BC-AD 200*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1996.
- Lendon, J. E. "The Rhetoric of Combat: Greek Military Theory and Roman Culture in Julius Caesar's Battle Descriptions." *Classical Antiquity* 18, no. 2 (1999): 273-329.
- Levene, D. S. "Warfare in the Annals." In *The Cambridge Companion to Tacitus*, edited by A. J. Woodman, 225-238. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.
- Riggsby, A. M. *Caesar in Gaul and Rome: war in words*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006.