

REVIEW

TACITUS' *HISTORIES*, PROVINCIAL SOLDIERS,
AND DIDACTIC HISTORIOGRAPHY

Jonathan Master, *Provincial Soldiers and Imperial Instability in the Histories of Tacitus*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016. Hardback, \$70.00. Pp. 238. ISBN 978-0-472-11983-7.

This study sets out to explain the significance of the account of the Batavian revolt that Tacitus embeds in his narrative of AD 69–70 in the *Histories*. Master (hereafter M.) seeks to answer the questions, ‘Why do the *Histories* contain this emphasis on provincial soldiers? What is it intended to illustrate for readers?’ (1). In the Introduction, M. lays out the problem to be tackled in the book, and contextualizes his approach in relation to previous scholarship on ancient historiography and Roman history. M.’s main argument is that Tacitus’ narrative of the Batavian revolt is intended to convince his readers that provincial soldiers, M.’s term for ‘subjects of Roman rule from the provinces who may be either legionary or auxiliary soldiers’ (1), need to be better integrated into Roman society in order to ensure the stability of the Empire as it continues to expand. Such provincial soldiers, including the disgruntled Batavian auxiliaries responsible for the revolt in the *Histories*, are to be viewed, he argues, not as unruly barbarians, but as participants in the project of Roman Imperial expansion who have a legitimate grievance because they are not rewarded for their labours with a place in the Roman Imperial hierarchy, but instead are treated ‘as virtual slaves’ (2). Tacitus’ ideal solution to this problem, according to M., is ‘a policy of reorienting the loyalties and values of these provincial soldiers—that is, manipulating their ethnic identity—in order to make them loyal Romans’ (4). M. views the narrative of the Batavian revolt as ‘the *Histories*’ case study for readers on how to prevent subsequent revolts’ (24), namely by ‘drawing provincials more closely into the empire, giving them rewards of citizenship and greater responsibility for the management of the empire, which, in turn, will make the entire empire more stable and secure’ (28). M. contextualizes these claims in terms of other points in the works of Tacitus where similar questions of ethnic identity appear (the adoption of Roman values in Britain, *Agr.* 21; Claudius’ speech on the admission of Gauls to the Senate, *Ann.* 11.24), which justify M. in adopting ‘the premise that Tacitus’ concerns included ethnic identity, Roman absorption of subject peoples, and the success of the state’ (7). M. situates his study against the background of previous analyses of Tacitus’ narrative of the Batavian revolt, Ian

Haynes' recent work on the Roman auxiliaries,¹ and modern theories on ethnic soldiers (e.g. the service of Gurkhas in the British army). The linchpin of M.'s argument, however, is his assertion that Tacitean historiography is didactic in its purpose: '[Tacitus'] discussion of the past is necessarily meant to reflect and even provide a framework for understanding and influencing contemporary events' (19). M. traces this didactic thread through Tacitus' Greek historiographical predecessors Herodotus, Thucydides, and Polybius, all of whom intended their works to be of use for contemporary statesmen.

In chapter 1 ('The Batavian Revolt I: The Risks of Reliance on Provincial Soldiers'), M. argues that Tacitus' point in including the Batavian revolt narrative in the work is to show that 'the Batavian auxiliaries prove capable of destabilizing the empire' (37). Two speeches serve as the focus of M.'s analysis: ringleader Julius Civilis' complaint that he and the Treviri (his addressees) have not received from the Romans what he feels to be their due recompense for all they have done in the service of Rome (*Hist.* 4.32.2), and Roman commander Petilius Cerialis' attempts to counter those assertions (*Hist.* 4.73–4). Although Tacitus portrays Civilis as 'a treacherous liar', he nevertheless 'uses Civilis' words to present an instructively critical perspective on Roman provincial management', and the text of the *Histories* 'yields many reasons for taking Civilis' arguments seriously' (39). Allusions to Sallust and Quintilian make Civilis' arguments more palatable to Roman readers by contextualizing them in terms of ongoing Roman discourse about the proper reward for soldiers, while similarities with Cicero's *Pro Balbo* shows Civilis' engagement with a pre-existing 'theory of Roman imperial management that requires the participation and compensation of allied peoples' (48). Cerialis' speech, on the other hand, which tries to counter Civilis' arguments by emphasizing the benefits of Roman rule and the superfluity of provincial soldiers, 'because of its dishonesty collapses in on itself' (51). His argument is undermined by his false claim that Romans invaded Gaul *nulla cupidine* (*Hist.* 4.73.2), which neglects mention of the great conqueror Julius Caesar. In the remainder of the chapter, M. offers episodes in *Ann.* 3 and 4 in which Vitellian and Flavian troops use auxiliaries in their attacks on Rome as evidence that 'the presence and significance of provincial soldiers within the ranks of the army introduces a foreign element' (63): a lack of cultural unity in these diversely constituted forces 'results in their turning their violence back on Rome' (70).

In chapter 2, M. zooms out to provide a big-picture view by considering the survey of the conditions of the Empire (*status imperii*) in the *Histories*' proem (*Hist.* 1.4–11). This inventory serves as 'a reminder of how tenuous Rome's grasp on its empire is and how unlikely it is that peace will ever endure for

¹ I. P. Haynes, *Blood of the Provinces: The Roman auxilia and the Making of Provincial Society from Augustus to the Severans* (Oxford, 2013).

long' (75), in that it demonstrates the geographical sources of Vespasian's power, and the challenges this disparate empire presents 'to whoever is trying to rule it' (79). Tacitus' decision to organize this preliminary excursus geographically is a departure from other historians' similar scene-setting digressions, which tend to proceed chronologically, laying out preceding events that have a causative relationship with whatever is the main focus of the historian's analysis (e.g. Thucydides' 'Archaeology' and *pentekontaitia*, the digression on the history of Rome in Sallust's *Bellum Catilinae*). M. argues that Tacitus' choice of geographical organization for *Hist.* 1.4–11 is informed by Augustus' *Res Gestae*, whose section on foreign affairs is similarly organized; through this imitation, Tacitus underlines the instability of the Empire via 'a startling reversal of the trope of geography as a symbol of domination' (88).

Chapter 3 ('The Annalistic Structure of the *Histories*') aims to give the big-picture view of the *Histories* in a different way: by examining the extent of the work's adherence to traditional annalistic structuring mechanisms as a way of exploring 'the meaning of the category-defying events [Tacitus] tries to fit into that form' (99), particularly the difficulty Tacitus has of fitting the events of a civil war into a framework of *res internae/res externae* established by the annalistic tradition. After a summary of the history of annalistic history-writing and its close connection to the Republican form of government, M. examines how Tacitus does nod to this historiographical tradition by including three types of annalistic material: consular dating formulae, accounts of grain shortages, and obituaries of prominent individuals. The analysis then turns to an examination of narrative devices that demonstrate the limitations of the annalistic form: Tacitus' pervasive use of analepsis shows that the causative forces at work in the events of AD 69 go so far back that an annalistic account is insufficient to encompass them, while the absence of the annalistic form's normal alternation between internal and external affairs breaks down the distinction between domestic and foreign enemies, between Roman and Other.

Chapter 4 ('The Batavian Revolt II: Failures of Imagination') picks up where chapter 1 left off by applying M.'s arguments about the hybrid nature of the Batavians' identity to the question of why their revolt ultimately fails. Because the Batavi have lived under Roman rule for several generations, 'breaking away from the Romans and reverting to their earlier condition is impossible', and they 'fail to understand that political freedom from Roman rule will not and cannot eliminate the influence and impact of Rome' (141). Julius Sabinus' claim to descent from Julius Caesar (*Hist.* 4.55.2), Civilis' need to grow out his hair and dye it red in order to look more barbarian (*Hist.* 4.61.1), and his resemblance to the disgraced Roman general Sertorius (*Hist.* 4.13.2) all serve as proof that the Batavi can no longer claim to be untainted by Roman-ness. The Romans, although they do manage to suppress the revolt, display ignorance of their own: 'Their wish to revert to an earlier situation in which

militarily and culturally superior Romans rule the inferior provincials' shows that they have not abandoned the imperialist attitudes that incited the Batavi to rebel in the first place (141). In a speech to his troops, Vocula champions 'a reassertion of the distinction of Roman versus Other'; he cannot convince them and is murdered, showing that this kind of rhetoric 'will fail to stabilize the empire' (153). As a final, and powerful, demonstration of the incompatibility of Vocula's old-fashioned view with the reality of the Imperial present, M. examines an episode in which the Batavi must make a decision as to how they will treat the Roman colony of Cologne. The Tencteri, a hard-line voice within the rebellion, insist that the city can only be reintegrated into the Germanic freedom embodied by the rebels if all of Cologne's Roman inhabitants are murdered (*Hist.* 4.64.2). But this is impossible, as a speaker for the city notes: since the Ubii have intermarried with Romans, accepting the demand of the Tencteri would entail the impossible task of killing their own children (*Hist.* 4.65.2). This is a powerful demonstration of how intertwined Roman and 'barbarian' have become.

In chapter 5 ("Chattorum quondam populus": Lessons of the *Histories*), M. attempts to demonstrate that Tacitus not only identifies the threat posed by provincial soldiers who are insufficiently integrated into the Roman Empire, but also suggests a solution to the problem that he wishes his readers to adopt: better integration of provincials into Roman culture and government. The digression Tacitus gives on the history of the Batavi prior to the rebellion (*Hist.* 4.12) reveals that they are an offshoot of another tribe, the Chatti, and therefore have in the past shown themselves capable of changing their ethnic identity. Reading this digression through the lens of *Hist.* 1.4.1 and *Ann.* 4.33.2, in which Tacitus advocates studying the past because it facilitates understanding of the causes of events, M. interprets the Batavi's previous shift in identity as implicitly providing the key to how the Romans should manage them in the present: 'The Romans must fully embrace the Batavi and offer them one last transformation of identity' by allowing them to 'go from Batavian to Roman' (172). M. backs up this assertion by examining other passages in the *Histories* where he believes Tacitus demonstrates that people are in fact capable of changing their ethnic identities. In one, a Pontic freedman named Anicetus, who joins Vitellius, easily slaughters a Roman cohort, stationed at Trapezus and composed of Greeks who have been granted Roman citizenship (*Hist.* 3.47.1–2); the fact that these Greek troops have become a Roman cohort of Roman citizens is evidence that their identity is changing, that 'they ... have begun to shift along the scale from Other to Roman' (174). Similar conclusions are drawn from Caecina's appearance to the citizen townspeople of Northern Italy in barbarian costume (*Hist.* 2.20.1): Caecina's choice of Germanic dress shows that his own identity as a Roman has been compromised by the Germans who make up his army. Vitellius, too, seems to waver in his Romanness:

after he adopts the title Germanicus, his mother insists on referring to him as Vitellius, a pun on *vítel(l)íú*, the Oscan word for ‘Italy’. This pun ‘challenges the idea of Italianness’ by recalling the time of the Social War, ‘when Latin-speaking Rome was one of many communities’ in Italy; just as all other Italians have since become Roman, so too will the Germans, making the events of AD 69 merely ‘the latest stage in the process of the internal consolidation of the empire’ (184–5). A similar connection with the Social Wars is asserted for *Hist.* 2.38.1–2, in which Tacitus claims that the civil wars of Marius/Sulla, Pompey/Caesar, and Octavian have the same root cause as the civil war of AD 69. Since the Social Wars occurred during that same Late Republican period, M. argues, this invites the reader to compare the Batavian revolt and the Social Wars; just as the Social Wars were settled when Roman citizenship was extended to all Italians, the reader should realize, ‘the solution to preventing future Batavian revolts is incorporation into the citizenship and the state’ (189).

In the ‘Conclusions’, M. both summarizes his argument and briefly considers the impact of his assertions on our understanding of Tacitus’ famous excursus on the Jews (*Hist.* 5.2–10), a *bête noire* for Tacitean scholars and historians of Judaism alike. Much as it did for the Batavi, M. argues, ‘Roman misrule’ in Judaea ‘contributed to the revolt’ (198). The Jews are represented as much more radically un-Roman than the Batavi were, but this does not necessarily mean that Rome has finally found a true ‘Other’, because of the Flavians’ strong connection with Judaea. Tacitus depicts ‘Vespasian, Titus, and the entire Flavian force as underwritten by Jewish *superstitio*’, which ‘adds a qualification to the clean separation that the narrator’s barbarization of the Jews suggests exists between Roman and Other’ (205).

M.’s illuminating and provocative study is sure to stimulate future discussions on the *Histories*, and on the nature of Tacitean historiography more broadly. This book is an important contribution to the consideration of Tacitus’ vision of empire. M.’s strongest contribution is his clear demonstration that the provinces and their inhabitants are an important concern for the historian: alongside his observations on the characters of the major political players of the *Histories* and the nature of imperial power, Tacitus also has thought deeply about how these power-struggles reverberate through the vast territory Rome controls. Many of M.’s perspicacious observations on particular passages and features of the *Histories* will add much to our understanding of the work, and will have to be taken on board by its students in the future. M.’s chapter 3 is particularly to be commended: it is high time for someone to imitate J. Ginsburg’s excellent analysis of annalistic normativity and deviation in the *Annals* and make a similar study of the *Histories*, and the last two sections of this chapter (‘The Limits of the *Histories*’ *Annals*’ and ‘The Annalistic Categories *Res Internae* and *Res Externae*’) are very strong indeed.

Where M.'s study raised questions for me, and where it will surely provoke further dialogue in Tacitean scholarship, is in the notion of the *Histories*' didactic purpose in providing lessons to readers about best practices in imperial administration. In chapter 5, where M. argues most strongly for this didactic interpretation, some of his examples could be read quite differently. The fact that Tacitus points out that the Batavi grew out of an offshoot of the Chatti (*Hist.* 4.12) does not necessarily imply that he is arguing they should, or even can, change again to become fully Roman. Similarly problematic is the example of the Roman cohort at Trapezus. In claiming that these soldiers were becoming Romanized, M. is forced to argue against what Tacitus actually seems to say about them: that their inherent Greekness persistently continues to impair their fighting ability although they are now Roman citizens and have all the visible markers of Roman soldiers (*Hist.* 3.47.2: *mox donati civitate Romana signa armaque in nostrum modum, desidiam licentiamque Graecorum retinebant*). So, on a different reading, these examples seem to suggest that a transformation of ethnic identity is not always possible or likely; if so, can cultural integration really be a viable cure for what ails the Roman Empire?

It also may be true that a shift in cultural identity is not possible in the same way for every subject people. The Batavi are merely one of many groups the Romans had to deal with in the entire period between AD 69 and the death of Domitian, and, in my mind, M.'s analysis would have been strengthened by more explicit consideration of the fact that the *Histories* as we possess it today is only a fragment of the whole work. How would M.'s argument about the importance of the Batavian revolt look different if we considered what the rest of the text might have looked like? In chapter 3, for example, the thrust of M.'s argument about annalistic structuring is somewhat compromised by the fact that he does not tackle head-on the problem posed by the *Histories*' state of preservation.² M. asserts that Tacitus 'finds few opportunities to write about affairs that he may confidently call foreign' (99), which is certainly true of the *extant* portion of the *Histories*. But our picture of the balance between *res internae* and *res externae* would probably look very different if we had, say, Tacitus' account of Titus' siege of Jerusalem, or Domitian's campaigns against the Chatti. The loss of most of the *Histories* certainly does not invalidate M.'s larger thesis about the issues raised by the Batavian revolt, but it must be borne in mind that our picture of Tacitus' recommendations for the integration of provincials in the *Histories* might look very different if we had the rest of the work. The fate of Judaea is a case in point. While M.'s arguments that Jew and Roman are not as dissimilar as they may seem are well founded, we would need to know how Tacitus portrayed such events as the capture of Jerusalem and the siege

² M. does acknowledge the challenge of assessing adherence to annalistic structuring devices in a work of which we possess the account of just over one year (134), but only toward the end of the chapter.

of Masada in order to make any assessment about how (and whether) the lessons of *Histories* 4 can be applied to all scenarios of provincial management. The Jews would arguably turn out to be the example *par excellence* of a people whom the Romans attempted to eliminate rather than integrate, as evident in Hadrian's eventual attempt to replace Jerusalem with the new *Colonia Aelia Capitolina* in the AD 130s. So while M.'s conclusions about the integration of provincials are valuable as regards the Batavi, more caution is perhaps advisable in taking them as representative of Tacitus' views on how to deal with non-Romans in general.

Still, these are not criticisms so much as reactions. These issues should stimulate continuing debate in the world of Tacitean scholarship, and M. is to be commended for a thought-provoking look at an often underappreciated aspect of the *Histories*.

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