

The Low Countries In Tacitus' *Annals*: An Epic and Tragic Landscape¹

Tacitus' account of the campaigns of Germanicus from AD 14 to 16 in the hinterlands of the province of Lower Germany (Germania Inferior) contains some of the most vivid descriptions to be found anywhere in Roman prose literature². These are descriptions of what was in Roman eyes mostly wilderness country consisting of vast forests, treacherous peat bogs, and huge tidal flats, the last two features of the landscape being prominent especially in what would now be the western and northern parts of The Netherlands³. Germanicus' campaign during these three years ranged across a large tract of territory extending north to the North Sea and to the east as far as the Weser River, thus taking in that part of The Netherlands which lies north of the Rhine.

Roman hopes of extending the German portion of their empire as far as the Elbe River, leading to the formation of a Danube-Elbe instead of a Danube-Rhine frontier, had been dashed in AD 9 when a Roman army under the command of Publius Quintilius Varus and consisting of three legions had been annihilated by a confederacy of German tribes under the leadership of Arminius (Hermann in German) in the so-called battle of the Teutoburger Wald, about 50-70 km east of the present Dutch province of Overijssel. (The exact site of this battle, very decisive for later European history, has never been identified.)

Even the flattering portrait that Tacitus draws of Germanicus, the highly popular nephew of the emperor Tiberius, cannot disguise the fact that his military campaigns were to a large extent ineffective in undoing the damage done by the disaster of AD 9, and that in fact they were conspicuously lacking in any coherent strategy. The intent of Germanicus' campaigning seems to have been mainly punitive in nature, designed to boost Roman morale along the German frontier but not to make any significant territorial gains for the Romans. The emperor probably came to realize the essential purposelessness of his nephew's campaigns, and it was for this reason, rather than out of jealousy for Germanicus' popularity as Tacitus insinuates, that he

transferred Germanicus from his German command to the supreme governorship of the eastern provinces, where Germanicus died under mysterious circumstances.

Tacitus' principal source for his account of Germanicus' campaigns was in all likelihood Pliny the Elder's history of the German-Roman wars, to which in fact he makes explicit reference. Pliny's narrative must have contained descriptions of the terrain over which Germanicus and his army had to move and of the hazards of nature with which they had to contend, for as an amateur scholar and scientist the author of the *Natural History* would have had a keen eye for such facts. Another source was almost certainly an epic poem on these campaigns composed by Pedo Albinovanus, who had served under Germanicus and thus had written from first-hand experience. A passage from this poem has fortunately been preserved by Seneca the Elder, and, as this paper will show, some of the imaginative vision of this text is paralleled in a section of Tacitus' narrative.

However, the strong rhetorical and poetical colouring of Tacitus' narrative, including his descriptions of landscape and nature, were inspired by other literary sources besides Pedo's epic, most notably by Vergil's *Aeneid*, while there are echoes also of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura* ("On the Nature of Things"), and Senecan tragedy, so that one might say that Tacitus' landscape is as much literary and poetical as factual. A few studies have been made already of the Vergilian echoes in Tacitus' narrative, with particular attention to the parallels between the Aeneas-Turnus conflict in the second half of the *Aeneid* and the struggle between Germanicus and Arminius⁴. This paper will focus on the poetical colouring of some descriptions of nature and landscape in Tacitus' narrative and will suggest the literary sources which lie behind this aspect of his style. It is not the objective to pinpoint these sources with absolute certainty, for in this respect I am not as confident as some critics and commentators. In other words, this paper does not pretend to be a rigorous

exercise in source-criticism; rather, it hopes mainly to identify some descriptive passages which are discernibly epic and tragic in their poetical colouring and would have been inevitably linked to earlier epic and tragedy in the mind of an educated Roman reader at the beginning of the second century.

The descriptions of the landscape and natural hazards of the hinterlands of Lower Germany are concentrated in Tacitus' account of the campaigns of the years 15 and 16 (*Annals* 1. 60-72 and 2. 5-26). It suffices to mention that the campaign of the year 14 consisted largely of an extended punitive raid deep into the territory of the Chatti, a tribe in central Germany which had allied itself with Arminius. However, the campaign of the following year was more ambitious, although it is difficult to comprehend what Germanicus' ultimate strategic objective was. A three-pronged expedition was launched deep into the heart of north central Germany, where the sources of the Ems and the Lippe rivers were situated. Germanicus himself took the sea-route, which at this point is not described in detail by Tacitus, but it is likely that he sailed across Lake Flevo, which at this time, unlike the later Zuiderzee, was only a narrow inlet joined to the open sea by a number of channels. Once he reached the North Sea, he sailed eastwards; the land that he would have seen then if he hugged the shore would have been the huge tidal flats that, upon his return journey, were to cause some of his troops such great difficulty. Germanicus seems to have assembled his whole army a considerable distance up the Ems River, and then moved southwards.

According to Tacitus (*Annals* 1.61), Germanicus now conceived a strong desire to visit the site of the disastrous battle of six years earlier. The approach to this was through forest and marsh country, necessitating the construction of bridges and causeways across the latter. Tacitus' language in describing the progress of the troops through this territory becomes mannered and poetical (1.61), in expressions such as *occulta saltuum* (literally, "the hidden places of the forest poses") and *umido paludum* (literally, "the watery places of the marshes"). Finally, the site is reached. It is covered with the skeletal remains of men and horses. Skulls had been nailed to tree trunks. "In the neighbouring groves stood the savage altars at which they had slaughtered the tribunes and chief centurions."⁵ There were also pillories in which prisoners had been held fast and perhaps tortured, as well as ditches for mass-executions. A surrealistically ghastly scene, therefore. Brief references to human sacrifice occur in earlier classical epic (Vergil, *Aeneid* 10. 517-520 and Homer, *Iliad* 23. 175-177); but the description is especially

evocative of Seneca's tragedy *Thyestes* (641-789), where in a secluded, gloomy grove behind the royal place, Atreus slaughters, in an act that is described in terms of a monstrous sacrifice, the two young sons of his brother and arch-enemy Thyestes, and then prepares their corpses for the ghastly banquet that he will place before his unknowing brother.

In this part of the narrative and elsewhere too (*Annals* 1.61, 63, 64, 65, 68; 2.19), Tacitus makes repeated reference to the marshy condition of much of the countryside through which Tacitus and his men had to travel. This is obviously a realistic detail, descriptive of the huge and treacherous peat bogs that extended across the hinterlands of Lower Germany. Marshland was known to the Romans above all from the notorious malaria-breeding Pomptine marshes south of Rome, which were not drained until the twentieth century. However, marshiness was also associated with the mythological landscape of the underworld; book six of the *Aeneid* calls attention a number of times to the marshiness of Hades, especially in the area of the Styx River (6.323, 393, 415, 438). Even more suggestive of the mythological underworld is the absence of any living colour in the landscape described by Tacitus. Everything seems to be suffused with a pervasive gloom even though Germanicus conducted his campaigns at a time of the year — spring and summer — when there should have been an abundance of vivid colour. However, words denoting or suggesting brilliant sunshine and vibrant colour appear to have been studiously avoided. This is a gloomy, monochrome landscape — perhaps such as Vergil describes in *Aeneid* 6. 268-272:

They walked obscure through night's dark loneliness past Pluto's empty halls and vacant thrones: as one might walk through woods beneath a moon malign and blotched, when Jove has hidden heaven in shadow, and black night robs the world of colour⁶.

The most striking descriptive passage comes in Chapter 70 of Book 1. After his inconclusive expedition into Germany, Germanicus himself and many of his troops returned by the same sea-route back to their winter quarters at Vetera (present day Xanten) on the Rhine in Lower Germany. In order to lighten his ships in the shallow waters especially at ebb tide, he disembarked two of the legions he had taken with him and placed them under the command of Vitellius, who was to conduct them by land, following the coastline, within sight perhaps of the fleet, and thus walking some of the time across the tidal flats. However, a sudden gale blew from the north at the time of the Fall equinox and caused

all the low-lying land to flood, creating great havoc for Vitellius and his men, with some soldiers drowning in the fast-rising waters. "Then the whole land became a flood: sea, shore, and plain wore a single aspect, and it was impossible to distinguish solid from fluid, deep from shallow."⁷ The description is reminiscent of the picture drawn in the first book of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (5-9) of the primeval chaos that prevailed before an ordered universe came into being:

Before there was any earth or sea, before the canopy of heaven stretched overhead, Nature presented the same aspect the world over, that to which men have given the name of Chaos. This was a shapeless, uncoordinated mass, nothing but a weight of lifeless matter, whose ill-assorted elements were indiscriminately heaped together in one place⁸.

The Roman reader may also have been reminded of Lucretius' account, in book five of his great Epicurean-didactic poem *De Rerum Natura* (416ff), of what the universe was like at the beginning, when the atoms of the different elements were indiscriminately mingled together, before eventually the elemental particles of earth, water, air, and fire began to assort themselves into fairly uniform conglomerates, leading to the formation of the earth and the heavenly bodies in their present state.

Tacitus describes with great rhetorical vigour the predicament of Vitellius and his men and the futility of their efforts to extricate themselves:

Men were dashed over by the billows or drawn under by the eddies: packhorses - their loads - lifeless bodies - came floating through, or colliding with, the ranks. The companies became intermingled, the men standing one moment up to the breast, another up to the chin, in water; then the ground would fail beneath them, and they were scattered or submerged. Words and mutual encouragement availed nothing against the deluge: there was no difference between bravery and cowardice, between wisdom and folly, circumspection or chance; everything was involved in the same fury of the elements⁹.

The image of Chaos is, of course, continued in this passage, but one can also discern the *topoi* (or commonplaces), frequently encountered in epic (including didactic epic) and tragic poetry, that an enemy may present such a superior force that any attack or resistance is utterly futile or that certain forces of nature are so overwhelming that no one and nothing can withstand them (Vergil, *Aeneid* 10. 379-411, 10. 689-768, 11. 648-724, 12. 325-382; Lucretius 1. 280 ff; Seneca, *Agamemnon* 465ff).

The final striking passage comes near the conclusion of Tacitus' account of Germanicus' campaign of AD 16. That year Germanicus built a huge armada of ships (Tacitus' figure of 1,000 is, however, probably exaggerated), which he convened at the so-called Island of the Batavians - roughly coextensive with today's Betuwe in the Netherlands. (The Batavians had been allies of the Romans for decades and provided them with auxiliary troops.) He then sailed through the Vecht (which had probably been partially canalized by his father Drusus 30 years earlier), across Lake Flevo and into the North East, and then eastwards to the Ems River, where his troops disembarked and marched further eastwards to the Weser River. There Germanicus won a couple of victories, although this campaign too proved to be inconclusive. Eventually Germanicus withdrew his army, with some of the troops marching back to winter quarters by land but the majority, including Germanicus again following the sea-route. After his army embarked at the Ems River, the fleet sailed north into the open sea and then westwards.

But a terrible storm struck Germanicus and his ships. It is vividly described in Chapters 23 and 24 of Book Two of the *Annals*. The description recalls that of the epic storm in the first book of the *Aeneid*, (81 ff) where Aeneas' fleet is hit by a savage storm (cf. also the storm-scene in Seneca, *Agamemnon* 465ff, which is clearly inspired by Vergil). In both the Vergilian and the Tacitean storm scenes, the waves are buffeted by conflicting winds, and the tempest is of cataclysmic proportions. In contrast to Aeneas' fleet, however, some of Germanicus' ships were wrecked, while others were stranded on barren islands where the men starved to death. Germanicus' galley landed on the coast and there eventually most of the surviving ships assembled. Repairs were made and ships were sent to look for survivors on the islands. The calamity was so great according to Tacitus, Germanicus nearly committed suicide by flinging himself into the water. An unheroic piece of behaviour perhaps, but it recalls the despair of Aeneas in the storm when he wishes he had perished in the battle at Troy. Many of Germanicus' ships and men had been swept into *terra incognita*, and the survivors returned with strange tales. "Not a man returned from the distance without his tale of marvels - furious whirlwinds, unheard-of birds, enigmatic shapes half-human and half-bestial; things seen, or things believed in a moment of terror."¹⁰ Tacitus' report of these stories of quasi-mythical horrors, and his underlying suggestion of the power of delusion over the human mind at times of terrible stress and fear, carries an echo of Vergil's Hades. At one point Aeneas encounters, near the

entrance to the underworld, a gallery of monstrous apparitions (*Aeneid* 6. 285-294), at which he lashes out with this sword but which turn out to be only harmless phantoms. The surviving fragment of the epic poem by Pedo Albinovanus earlier referred to is also relevant to the Tacitean scenario of delusions inspired by terror of the unknown. It captures the feeling of wonder but also of foreboding of those who sail into *terra incognita*:

For a long time now they have left the land and the sun behind; for a long time now banished from the regions of the world they know, they boldly voyage through the forbidden gloom to the bounds of all things and the farthest shores of the universe¹¹.

Tacitus' description of the hinterlands of Lower Germany, which include a large slice of the present Low Countries, constitutes a veritable Tacitean landscape inspired as much by the author's imagination and the literary tradition as by factual information. It is really a semi-mythical landscape of a country that borders on *terra incognita*, gloomy, treacherous, dread-inspiring and largely inhospitable to human civilization. It is a landscape not in the least captivating to the classical taste, which experienced little of the much later romantic attraction in the West for raw, unspoiled nature. And it is, of course, a landscape that has been utterly transformed over the past two millennia.

NOTES

1 / The first version of this paper was presented at the annual CAANS conference at the University of Victoria, British Columbia, in May 1990.

2 / Invaluable commentary on this part of the *Annals* is provided by H. Furneaux (ed.), *The Annals of Tacitus*, volume I (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1896), and F.R.D. Goodyear (ed.) *The Annals of Tacitus*, volume II (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981). On Tacitus' narrative and descriptive style, see U. Rademacher, *Die Bildkunst des Tacitus* (Hildesheim and New York: Georg Olms Verlag, 1975).

3 / For an excellent account of the geography and topography of the Netherlands during the Roman period, see J.H.F. Bloemers, L.P. Louwe Kooijmans and H. Sarfatij, *Verleden Land: Archeologische Opgravingen in Nederland* (Amsterdam: Meulenhoff Informatief, 1981), 76-77.

4 / R.T.S. Baxter, "Vergil's Influence on Tacitus in books 1 and 2 of the *Annals*", *Classical Philology* 67 (1972), 246-269; J. Bews, "Virgil, Tacitus, Tiberius, Germanicus," *Proceedings of the Virgil Society* 12 (1972-73), 35-48;

H.W. Bird, "Germanicus Mytheroicus," *Echos du Monde Classique/Classical News and Views* 17 (1973), 94-101.

5 / Translation by John Jackson, *Tacitus*, volume 2, Loeb Classical Library (London and New York: William Heinemann and G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1931), 349.

6 / Verse translation by Frank O. Copley, *The Aeneid*, Library of Liberal Arts (Indianapolis and New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965), 123-124.

7 / Translation by John Jackson (see note 5), 363.

8 / Prose translation by Mary M. Innes, *The Metamorphoses of Ovid* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1955), 29.

9 / Translation by John Jackson, 363.

10 / *Ibid.*, 419.

11 / My translation of the first 4 lines of the Pedo Albinovanus fragment; Latin text in Furneaux (see note 2), appendix I.