CHAPTER EIGHT

RHOXOLANI BLUES (TACITUS, HISTORIES 1.79):
VIRGIL'S SCYTHIAN ETHNOGRAPHY REVISITED

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In many modern readers, the notion of warfare and descriptions of battles understandably stir ambivalent or negative feelings: people feel despair at the loss of human life (even in a ‘just’ war) and horror at the dehumanising effects of warfare on individuals. The idea that ancient audiences could actually read (or view) descriptions of battles for enjoyment can therefore seem odd and alien. Some years ago, Stephen Harrison in his commentary on Virgil Aeneid 10 speculated that, for precisely this reason, scholars and readers had for a long time been less willing to turn their attention to the second half of the Aeneid, because of the dominant role of warfare in the narrative. Yet in ancient historiography the enjoyment to be gained from reading battle narratives (particularly

1 Ancient authors were sensitive to the concept of the bellum iustum (e.g. Cic. Rep. 3.35 illa iniusta bella sunt, quae sine causa suscepta) and the concept was of course deployed for rhetorical purposes (e.g. Cic. Cat. 2.1, Phil. 8.12, 11.38, 13.35, Inv. 2.70, Off. 1.36, Fam. 6.6.6, Att. 7.14.3, 9.19.1), including praise (Suet. Aug. 21.2) and self-praise (RG 26). See Albert (1980) for the development of the concept between the First Punic War and the end of the Republic, with Harris (1979) 166–175. Mantovani (1990) analyses the concept of the ‘just war’ in the imperial period. As Mattern (1999) 184 observes, “The idea that wars of conquest ought not to be simply plundering missions, land grabs, or occasions of self-aggrandizement is very strongly attested, although all these things were good and legitimate results of a ‘just’ war—of a war, that is, provoked by the enemy.” Mattern-Parkes (2003) discusses one instance of an unjust war, Crassus’ war against the Parthians, which led to his defeat at Carrhae.

2 Such audience enjoyment may seem particularly odd in a Roman context (compared with the often idealised images encountered in e.g. archaic Greece). Hölscher (2003) 3 observes: “Realistic battle-scenes . . . seem to be a domain of Roman art.” He then goes on to make some interesting remarks about the reception of such scenes by viewers of works of art, depending on their own personal experience of battle (or lack of it).

3 Harrison (1991) xxxi–xxxiii (esp. xxxii: “Six books of battle-description, however skilfully varied and enriched with Homeric reminiscence, were likely to prove tedious even to an appreciative Roman readership unless leavened in some way”).

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those involving foreign conquest) is often highlighted by authors, as in a famous passage of Tacitus (Ann. 4.33.3):

nam situs gentium, varietates proeliorum, clari ducum exitus retinent ac redintegrant legentium animum ...4

For it is the localities of peoples, the ups and downs of battles, and the famous deaths of generals which grip and refresh readers’ minds ...

We can also think here of the emphasis so often placed in historiographical prologues on battles as an enticing “hook” for potential readers,5 while epic too evolves similar siren-like strategies at the opening of the narrative, frequently in the very first word or line.6 Although the notion of battle descriptions potentially having a reinvigorating impact on ancient readers may initially seem perplexing to us, there are ways in which it makes sense. For example, the fact that the reader of a battle description is usually an ‘absent presence’, in the sense of being an onlooker from a safe distance, can enhance enjoyment, especially if the scene involves a past disaster narrowly averted or stirs a sense of national pride.7 Indeed, Cicero in his letter to Lucceius (ad Fam. 5.12.5) identifies as a distinct constituency of readers those non-participants who went through no personal distress themselves, but who look upon the misfortunes of other people and experience an enjoyable sense of pity. That sense of distance effectively creates an emotional buffer zone and offers scope for a kind of pleasure which was probably different from how a veteran of the actual battle might react to the same account.8 One critic, David McNeil, who has analysed depictions of war in eighteenth-century English literature, explains the phenomenon in another way: “One may always derive an

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4 It is an elegant and appropriate touch that the verb redintegro (featuring 8× in Tacitus) is often used in military contexts for renewing warfare (OLD 2a redintegro), as at Tac. Hist. 4.13.3, 4.28.3, 4.34.4.

5 bellum ... magnum et atrox variaque victoria (Sall. Jug. 5.1), ea belli gloria est populo Romano ut ... (Liv. Pref. 7), opus ... atrox proeliis (Tac. Hist. 1.2.1).

6 arma virumque cano (Virg. Aen. 1.1), ordior arma (Sil. 1.1), fraternas acies (Stat. Theb. 1.1).

7 There are parallels from other eras. In an article analysing lukewarm reviews of Herman Melville’s book of poetry, Battle-Pieces and Aspects of the War (1866), Megan Williams (2003) 145 suggests that the public, conditioned by their experience of vivid photographic records of the American civil war, is “looking for ‘enjoyment,’ for the vicarious thrill that comes from the illusion of participating in the action as it occurs.”

8 That said, there are instances where a battlefield is mediated for non-combatants through the presence of actual participants, as at Tac. Hist. 2.70, Vitellius’ visit to the battlefield at Bedriacum (with Ash (2007b) 231–232, 274–275). See Pagán (2000) on such ‘aftermath narratives’ more generally.