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ARMINIUS INTO HERMANN: HISTORY INTO LEGEND

By HERBERT W. BENARIO

Our story begins with the discovery of Tacitus' *Germania*, the existence of which was known in the decade of the 1420s. The great manuscript-hunter, Poggio Bracciolini, tried mightily to have it brought from the German monastery of Fulda to Italy, but was repeatedly disappointed. He had been informed that a manuscript which lay there contained three *opera minora* of Tacitus as well as some works of Suetonius. This manuscript, known as the *Hersfeldensis*, was at last brought to Rome in 1455 by Enoch of Ascoli and soon came into the hands (we know not how) of Cardinal Aeneas Silvius Piccolomini, who not long thereafter became Pope Pius II.[1]

In 1457, the chancellor of the Bishop of Mainz, Martin Mair, wrote Piccolomini, as a representative of the Curia, a letter in which he lamented the miserable state of the Holy Roman Empire, caused by the Roman Church's harsh imposition of taxes. Mair compared the present with the more glorious past of the Middle Ages. Piccolomini replied early in the following year with an essay entitled *De ritu, situ, moribus et condicione Germaniae descriptio*, based upon Tacitus' *Germania*. He chose a different basis of comparison, namely the present opposed to the Germany of antiquity. Tacitus here proves invaluable, for Piccolomini is able to show that it is the church which has brought the Germans from barbarism to their present level of culture.

[1] H. W. Benario, 'Tacitus' *Germania* and Modern Germany', *ICS* 15 (1990), 163 ff. Recent books on the *Germania*, with translations and commentaries or notes, are Benario, *Tacitus Germany* (Warminster, 1999), A. R. Birley, *Tacitus Agricola and Germany* (Oxford, 1999), and J. B. Rives, *Tacitus Germania* (Oxford, 1999). Piccolomini was one of the leading figures of early Italian humanism. He was responsible for transforming his native city of Pienza into the first Renaissance city. See C. M. Ady, *Pius II (Aeneas Silvius Piccolomini): The Humanist Pope* (London, 1913); R. J. Mitchell, *The Laurels and the Tiara: Pope Pius II, 1458–1464* (New York, 1963); C. R. Mack, *Pienza: The Creation of a Renaissance City* (Ithaca, NY, 1987). S. Schama, *Landscape and Memory* (New York, 1995), reports in chap. 2, '*Der Holzweg:* The Track Through the Woods', 75 ff., on the Nazis' hunt for the MS, at Himmler's express orders. S. Rizzo, 'Per una tipologia delle tradizioni manoscritte di classici latini in età umanistica,' in O. Pecere & M. Reeve (eds.), *Formative Stages of Classical Traditions: Latin Texts from Antiquity to the Renaissance* (Spoleto, 1995), 371 ff., at 392 n. 74, reports that the MS is now in the possession of the Biblioteca Nazionale Vittorio Emanuele II di Roma. (I owe this reference to R. W. Ulery, Jr., of Wake Forest University.)

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This essay, which was not published for almost two score years, was nonetheless a revelation, for it invoked the authority of an ancient author in a current dispute, which was as much between Italy and Germany, between North and South, as it was about the proper relationship of the Roman Catholic church with its adherents outside the Papal States. Without knowing it, and with perhaps only the slightest intimation that he had let a genie out of a bottle which could never again be controlled, Aeneas Silvius had employed a Latin treasure which would soon have enormous impact upon the lives of Europe and the Church. In his reading of the text and his excerpting of those Tacitean comments which denigrated the ancient Germans, he must surely have noted that there were many more which spoke of their bravery and martial qualities.

It was these aspects of Tacitus' narrative which were next invoked. In 1471, the Pope's nephew, Giovannantonio Campano, spent several months in Regensburg as representative of the Holy See to the Diet. Since the fall of Constantinople to the Turks in 1453, the Roman Pontiffs had endeavoured to persuade German cities and princes and, above all, the emperor to undertake a holy crusade against the infidel. The response was marked by a singular lack of enthusiasm, for reasons political, financial, and military. Campano attempted to win over the Germans for this enterprise by painting a splendid picture of the ancient Germans' military prowess and glory, invoking the *Germania*. Like his uncle, Campano compared past and present, but he showed the similarities rather than the differences. Yet he had no more success than his predecessors at such gatherings had had.

The *editio princeps* of the *Germania* appeared in Venice in 1470; the first German printing followed in Nürnberg three years later. In 1496, Piccolomini's essay was published, and it was this event which gave an enormous impetus to enthusiasm for, and study of, Tacitus' monograph. Numerous editions and books concerned with Germany, its peoples, and its history rapidly followed.

In the year 1492, Conrad Celtis had delivered an inaugural address when he was appointed to the faculty of the University of Ingolstadt. This *oratio*, based upon the *Germania*, invoked the warlike character of the ancient Germans in support of the Empire against the Papacy. Eight years later he presented the first series of lectures on the *Germania* when he had moved to Vienna. The first of the German humanists, he represents a substantial body of men who concerned themselves with the Germans, not only in literature but also as revealed in history and

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tangible remains. They began the idealization of the Germans as well as research on them.[2]

The German people (at least the educated among them) began to appreciate that they had a past, that there was a common link joining the multitude of states and principalities, and that these ancestors, so different from the ancient Romans, were like themselves. Unlike Gaul, ancient Germany had never been conquered by Rome. In the present day, as many thought, why should the German peoples be subordinate, even inferior, to the Latin races of Italy and France?

Following hard upon Celtis' lectures and early writings were the great works of Jakob Wimpfeling,[3] which were accessible to a relatively wide public. He employed Tacitus' *Germania* in his work of similar title (1501) to argue against the French and their supporters that the Rhine was not the eastern boundary of France. Tacitus was the source of the information that, in antiquity, tribes whom the historian called German occupied territories west of the river.[4] And, in his *Epithoma* of German history published four years later, long stretches of the Tacitean text are cited.

The year 1515 saw the *editio princeps* of Tacitus' *Annales* 1-6, the Tiberius books, where the Cheruscan chieftain Arminius plays a significant role in the first two books, both as the greatest and most successful of Rome's enemies and as a foil for the Roman people's favourite, Germanicus. At the end of the second book, in the course of his obituary of Arminius, Tacitus calls him *liberator haud dubie Germaniae*, a man unbeaten in war. At last Germans of modern times had an historical hero, who had maintained the freedom of the Germans (as naively interpreted) against the rapacious Italians of the South. The ancient struggle between Roman and German, between South and North, served as a paradigm for the present day.[5]

Two years later, one of the most significant events in the history of the western world occurred in Wittenberg, when a monk named Martin Luther posted on the door of the Schlosskirche his ninety-five theses challenging the sale of indulgences. The religious revolution which

[2] Celtis (1459–1508) was crowned poet laureate in 1487 by the Holy Roman Emperor Frederick III. See L. W. Spitz, *Conrad Celtis. The German Arch-Humanist* (New York, 1966).

[3] Wimpfeling had influence on the development of German nationalism over a long period, born earlier than Celtis and living later than Hutten. See J. Knepper, *Jakob Wimpfeling (1450–1528): Sein Leben und seine Werke, nach den Quellen dargestellt* (Freiburg, 1902, rpt. Nieuwkoop, 1965).

[4] *Germ.* 28.4.

[5] D. Timpe, *Arminius-Studien* (Heidelberg, 1970); R. Kuehnemund, *Arminius or the Rise of a National Symbol in Literature* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1953); F. I. Borchardt, *German Antiquity in Renaissance Myth* (Baltimore, 1971).

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ensued, the Protestant Reformation, attracted a substantial number of the leading intelligentsia in German-speaking lands and exacerbated the split, political and emotional, with a theological cause. Hatred and distrust between North and South, between Germany and Italy, with integrity on one side and corruption on the other, became ever more bitter, culminating, perhaps, in the terrible sack of Rome in 1527 by the armies of the Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V.[6]

That event preceded by two years the publication of the literary work which established Arminius as the great German hero in the German mind. This was Ulrich von Hutten's *Arminius*, written in 1519 or 1520 and published posthumously. Its full title is *Arminius. Dialogus Huttenicus quo homo patriae amantissimus patriae laudem celebravit*. The emphasis upon the word *patria* is worth noting; the hero Arminius is the means of the glorification of the Germans and the lands of the various states. In modern terms, Hutten was a rabid nationalist.[7]

Hutten spent time in Italy in 1515, where he became acquainted with the text of Tacitus' *Annales* and closely studied Lucian's *Dialogues of the Dead*. He also developed an almost vitriolic dislike of Italy and its people. Lucian's twelfth *Dialogue*[8] is set in the court of Minos, where Alexander, Scipio, and Hannibal argue their respective positions in the ranking of great generals. Hutten's dialogue revises Lucian's by introducing Arminius into the discussion, thereby claiming for the Cheruscan a place in world history. He is not ranked before the three greats of Graeco-Roman history, but is added to them as one of the nonpareils of military history. The participants in the *Dialogus* are Arminius, Minos, Mercury, Alexander, Scipio, Hannibal, and Cornelius Tacitus. Arminius begins by faulting Minos for not having considered him when determining the best general. Arminius pleads his own case at great length, with Tacitus called as witness to recite his judgement of him from the end of *Annales* 2, and with virtuosic rhetorical skill wins his case, so that Minos gives his final judgement with these words:

Necesse est vero hunc qui norunt Arminium, praeclaram ob indolem valde ament, proinde auctum honore decet esse te, Germane, neque nos tuarum virtutum fas est unquam fieri immemores.

[6] See A. Kohler, *Karl V:1500–1558: eine Biographie* (Munich, 1999); W. S. Maltby, *The Reign of Charles V* (NewYork, 2002).

[7] Hutten lived from 1488 to 1523; see H. Holborn, *Ulrich von Hutten and the German Reformation* (London, 1937).

[8] This is §25 of M. D. Macleod's Loeb edition of Lucian, VII (London, 1961).

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It is indeed necessary that all who know Arminius love him deeply because of his splendid character, and further it is appropriate that you, German, be honoured, nor is it right that we ever become forgetful of your excellent qualities.

This last recalls Tacitus' bitter comment upon the Romans' lack of interest in contemporary and foreign events. Arminius is unknown to them, *dum vetera extollimus recentium incuriosi*.[9] Hutten's work was published in 1538 and 1557 in Wittenberg (significant as the home of Luther and Melanchthon!), but the first German translation did not appear until 1815. Consequently, it was not widely known and was accessible only to the educated.

It was Martin Luther himself who may have been the first to equate the name Arminius with the German Hermann, thereby expanding his popular appeal. In his discussion of the 82nd Psalm, Luther writes:

Herman, den die Latini ubel verkeren und Ariminium (sic) nennen, heist aber ein *Heer man, dux belli*.

Herman, whom the Latins treat badly and call Ariminius (sic), is actually an *Army man, a leader of war*.

The final step, perhaps, in the process of making Arminius a widely-known German hero, who could appeal to all Germans, regardless of their place of residence and their political attachments, was taken by Burkhard Waldis (1490-1556), who published in 1543 his *Illustrieten Reimchronik*, in German, which presented the twelve ancient German kings and princes who were famous for bravery and achievements. Ariovistus, also called Ehrenvest, holds the tenth place, Arminius/Hermann, the eleventh, Charlemagne, Karl der Grosse, the last. The verses which describe Arminius, twelve distichs, are flat and graceless, but they are the first verses written in German which glorify him.

Arminius, den man nennt Herman,
  Ein junger Held, ein kühner Man,
Von leib und gmüt wol aufferwachsen,
  Geborn vom Hartz, ein Fürst zu Sachssen.

Arminius, who is called Herman,
  A young hero, a bold man,
Who grew up well in body and soul,
  Born in the Hartz, a prince of Saxony.

The impact of these verses, in their original form and by quotation in other works, was significant. One may wonder if Ausonius' *Caesares*

[9] *Ann.* 2.88.3.

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furnished a model, or at least an idea, for this collection, particularly the similarity of the number *twelve* of the subjects. The *editio princeps* of that author had appeared as long ago as 1472.

It is surely too much to claim that, without knowledge of Tacitus' *Germania* and the first two books of his *Annales*, there would have been no German religious uprising, no Protestant reformation. As the letter of Chancellor Mair of Mainz showed in 1457, enmity toward the Roman Church existed long before Luther. But the discovery and increasingly wide dissemination of Tacitus' works added ancient authority to a largely emotional and religious dispute. Tacitus enabled many Germans to claim that they had once been not only the equals but even the superiors of their Italian tormentors. That belief, centered upon the figure of their great hero from antiquity, played a large role in German national consciousness in subsequent centuries.

It is clear that Arminius' place in German history and above all in the German imagination was secure by the middle of the sixteenth century. He, as a person, his wife Thusnelda, his achievements, individually and together became popular subjects for literary, dramatic, and operatic treatment.[10] I shall mention only a few examples.

Daniel Caspar von Lohenstein (1635-83) wrote a vast novel entitled *Arminius*, not yet completed when he died at age 48. He had not been able to write the ninth and last book of the second part. Although not yet published, anticipation was high because of his literary renown – he was famed as 'the German Seneca' – and it was expected to be the great national epic. The work appeared in 1689-90, with the title *Grossmüthiger Feldherr Arminius oder Hermann*, (Magnanimous General Arminius or Hermann), covering 3076 pages of quarto size.

The year 1769 saw the publication of two dramas with the same subject, by authors of rather different abilities. Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock (1724-1803) brought forth the first part of what proved to be a trilogy, *Hermanns Schlacht*, followed by *Hermann und die Fürsten* (1784) and *Hermanns Tod* (1787). The three comprise a substantial portion of the dramatic output of one of the most significant literary figures of the eighteenth century, a man with a European reputation.

Cornelius von Ayrenhoff (1733-1819) is one of the relatively few authors who place Thusnelda, Arminius' wife, on an equal level with

[10] For many aspects of Arminius' *Nachleben*, see R. Wiegels and W. Woesler (eds.), *Arminius und die Varusschlacht* (Paderborn, 1995).

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him. There is little ancient evidence about this woman; indeed, Tacitus never identifies her by name. But clearly she was a true match for her husband, a bold woman, ever the enemy of Rome, who became more renowned in times much nearer our own than hers because of literature, art, and music.[11]

There is record of 75 operas on the Arminius theme, performed between 1676 and 1910. Many were composed to the same libretto, none is part of the repertory of any opera company. The titles present the full range of people's views of the hero and those about him: *Arminius, der deutsche Erzheld, La Germania trionfante in Arminio, Hermann und Varus, Hermann und Thusnelda, Hermann der Deutsche*. Few of the composers will be familiar even to a devoted student of opera, but among them are Alessandro Scarlatti and Georg Friedrich Händel. Complete recordings exist of only two, that of Heinrich Biber from 1687 and Händel's (1737), which was issued by Sony in 2001. It is a very strange opera, really more oratorio than opera, with several peculiar twists to the story. But the music is indeed quite lovely.

I move now to the most visible evocation of Arminius/Hermann in the nineteenth century, the great statue raised near Detmold in the Teutoburg Forest. Although it is not the German National Monument (that distinction belongs to the Niederwalddenkmal of *Germania* near Rüdesheim), it probably has the greatest resonance in the popular mind. Surprisingly, it is the dream and work entirely of one man, a sculptor named Ernst von Bandel, who, over decades, at great personal expense and suffering, produced a monumental statue which was dedicated, in the presence of the first German Emperor, in 1875, only a few years after the humiliation of France and the establishment, under the impetus of Bismarck, of a German nation.[12]

There is a grand view from the top of the steep hill, with a vast panorama of the thick forest. The spectator can then see all too clearly how Varus could have been waylaid. The approach to the Hermannsdenkmal, once the top of the hill has been achieved, is by a gently sloping path, which brings the visitor to the rear of the statue. It is a most imposing complex, some fifty metres high including the base; Arminius himself wears a winged helmet and holds his right arm aloft. His right

[11] H. W. Benario, 'Three Tacitean Women', in S. K. Dickison and J. P. Hallett (eds)., *Rome and her Monuments. Essays on the City and Literature of Rome in Honor of Katherine A. Geffcken* (Wauconda, IL, 2000), 595 ff.

[12] T. Nipperdey, 'Nationalidee und Nationaldenkmal im 19. Jahrhundert, ' *HZ* 206 (1968), 529 ff. = *Gesellschaft, Kultur, Theorie. Gesammelte Aufsätze zur neueren Geschichte* (Göttingen, 1976), 133 ff., 432 ff.

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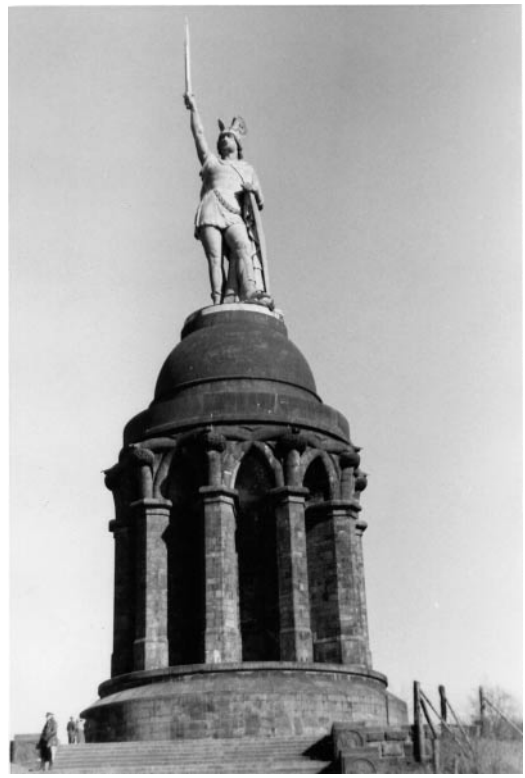


Fig. 1: 'The Hermannsdenkmal': author's own photo.

hand holds a sword, raised on high, on the blade of which, on the two sides, are the inscriptions, *Deutsche Einigkeit meine Stärke* and *Meine Stärke Deutschlands Macht* (German unity is my strength, my strength is Germany's might.) The blatant nationalism expressed on the sword is a statement of the pride of the German Empire, a perfect expression of the mood of Bismarck's Germany.

It was precisely at this period that Arminius' consort, Thusnelda, received her greatest tribute. The finest description we have of her from antiquity comes from Tacitus, where she is part of the entourage her father Segestes, who loathed Arminius and had snatched his daughter from her husband, brings with him to the protection of Germanicus and the Romans.

. . . et ereptus Segestes magna cum propinquorum et clientium manu. Inerant feminae nobiles, inter quas uxor Arminii eademque filia Segestis, mariti magis quam parentis

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animo. Neque evicta in lacrimas neque voce supplex, compressis intra sinum manibus gravidum uterum intuens.[13]

. . . and Segestes was rescued with a great following of relatives and clients. There were present women of noble birth, among whom was Arminius' wife who was also Segestes' daughter, whose spirit was rather that of her husband than of her father. She never broke down into tears nor spoke as a suppliant, with her hands pressed together within her bosom and gazing at her swollen womb.

This is a remarkable passage. She is her husband's wife rather than her father's daughter, and she has her husband's spirit and temper. Her downward glance at her swollen womb is portentous, as if threatening that a second Arminius lurks there. In her silence, she forecasts future disaster for Rome and those Germans, like her father, who support the invaders. It is therefore essential that mother and future child be kept away from homeland and loved one, that they become exiles in the lands of the enemy.

Thusnelda's part in Germanicus' triumph is not described by Tacitus. A pictorial version of what the historian might have written did not come for more than eighteen and a half centuries. It was Karl von Piloty, Germany's master of decorative historical painting, who in 1869 began his huge painting of 'Thusnelda in the Triumphal Procession of Germanicus', which took four years to complete. It is a huge canvas, measuring 7.1×4.9 metres, which hangs in the Neue Pinakothek, Munich.

Piloty was famed for his superb technique in the handling of colours, for his keen sense of the theatrical, and for his skill in representing masses of individuals. It is the shading of colour which above all stands out. In this vast panorama the corners are muted in various degrees of shade and darkness. Only the captives on parade are boldly and brightly displayed, with Thusnelda and her child in the centre represented almost luminescently. They appear slightly to the left of centre, preceded by male captives, accompanied by her female attendants. Tiberius sits toward the upper right, gazing down at her with a scowl, perhaps because her manner is so imperious, and standing next to the emperor, in the shadow, is her father Segestes. Toward the upper left corner, passing through an arch in his chariot, is the *triumphator*, barely visible and hence a minor participant in his own great occasion. Piloty has given the viewer a sense of the indomitable character of Arminius' wife, long since snatched from him, first by her father, then by the

[13] *Ann.* 1.57.3.

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Fig. 2: 'Piloty, Thusnelda im Triumphzug des Germanicus': courtesy of the Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen, Munich.

Romans. To the artist, she stands for the invincibility of the German race.[14]

One might expect that, after the debacle suffered by Germany in the Nazi era and the ensuing World War, the people would wish to reject symbols of their imperial past. With the Monument to Arminius, however, this proved not to be the case. In a collection of essays published in 1985, entitled *Germany Today. A Personal Report*, Walter Laqueur entitled one 'Arminius or Patriotism Rediscovered'. He notes the continuous presence of large numbers of people at the site of the monument and suggests that 'this pilgrimage must have . . . something to do with the quest for national identity' (144). Arminius himself and the terrain in which the statue stands represented then, almost twenty years ago, part of the rediscovery of *Heimat*, a word which embraces various concepts of old German culture, with its *mores*, its appreciation and yearning for the German landscape, exemplified by artists such as Anselm Feuerbach, and a history which seemed innocent and pure.

[14] K. Lankheit, *Karl von Piloty Thusnelda im Triumphzug des Germanicus* (Munich, 1984).

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One may wonder how widespread knowledge of Arminius is among the Germans of the present generation, after the precipitate decline in classical education. However, events of the last fifteen years have brought the historical Arminius to the fore once more, without the panoply of legend and blind hero-worship. In 1987, in the area of Kalkriese, northeast of Osnabrück, a British army officer, wandering the fields with a metal detector, found a large number of coins, all of which proved to be earlier than AD 9. Further finds led to excavation, which has continued without a break. It is now clear to me, beyond any reasonable doubt, that this was the site of Arminius' ambush of Varus and his legions. Many of the discoveries have been spectacular, such as the Roman equivalents of bullets, masks, bones, both human and animal, and long stretches of the rampart behind which the Germans hid.[15] The distance between the hill and the nearby moor is only some 900 metres, and now one can easily visualize how the slaughter developed, as the barbarians drove the Romans into the swamp. Tacitus described the scene when Germanicus arrived with his troops in the year 15.

> . . . they visited the mournful scenes, with their horrible sights and associations. Varus' first camp with its wide circumference and the measurements of its central space clearly indicated the handiwork of three legions. Further on, the partially fallen rampart and the shallow fosse suggested the inference that it was a shattered remnant of the army which had there taken up a position. In the centre of the field were the whitening bones of men, as they had fled, or stood their ground, strewn everywhere or piled in heaps. Near, lay fragments of weapons and limbs of horses, and also human heads, prominently nailed to trunks of trees. In the adjacent groves were the barbarous altars, on which they had immolated tribunes and first-rank centurions. Some survivors of the disaster who had escaped from the battle or captivity, described how this was the spot where the officers fell, how yonder the eagles were captured, where Varus was pierced by his first wound, where too by the stroke of his own ill-starred hand he found for himself death. They pointed out too the raised ground from which Arminius had harangued his army, the number of gibbets for the captives, the pits for the living, and how in his exultation he insulted the standards and eagles.[16]

The careful work of the archaeologists has brought to light one of the major sites of Roman Germany, which has become a tourist attraction of considerable magnitude. On April 21, the birthday of Rome, in the year 2003, a new museum was opened to the public, where visitors can see

[15] W. Schlüter (ed.), *Kalkriese – Römer im Osnabrücker Land* (Bramsche, 1993); W. Schlüter, 'The Battle of the Teutoburg Forest: Archaeological research at Kalkriese near Osnabrück', in J. D. Creighton and R. J. A. Wilson (eds.), *Roman Germany. Studies in Cultural Interaction*, *JRA* Supplementary Series 32 (1999), 125 ff.

[16] *Ann.* 1.61.1 ff. The translation is by A. J. Church and W. J. Brodribb.

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some of the evidence for the historical Arminius, the unquestioned liberator of Germany, in Tacitus' words. As is so often the case, facts are more impressive than fiction.

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