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The Bones on the Battlefield: Autopsy and Allusion in Ammianus Marcellinus (31.7.16)

The last book of Ammianus Marcellinus' *Res Gestae* leads up to the catastrophic Roman defeat at Adrianople in A.D. 378. The historian describes the poignant aftermath of an inconclusive preliminary skirmish with the Goths, when the Romans did not have time to bury more than a few of their soldiers: "the rest of the bodies were consumed by ominous fowl, who were wont at that time to feed on corpses, as is shown by the plains even now white with bones" (31.7.16). My paper contrasts two possible (not necessarily contradictory) interpretations of the passage: though a discreet claim of autopsy has often been seen (and thus a valuable autobiographical detail), I argue that the investigation of allusion is less speculative and far more profitable.

The idea of unburied bones is probably adapted from Libanius (*Or.*24.4), and the form of words (*albentes ossibus campi*) indisputably alludes to the last book of Vergil's *Aeneid* (12.35-36); the words also recall Tacitus' own Vergilian echo in describing the rediscovery of Roman remains from the defeat of Varus (*Ann.*1.61.2). I aim to demonstrate that Ammianus' intertextuality with all three texts is potentially meaningful. The ominous fowl (*dirae uolucres*) are also a Vergilian feature, and Ammianus' awareness of interpretations of Vergil (e.g. Servius ad 8.235, Silius 13.597ff) by glossing *dirae* as flesh-eating, though the word's normative meaning of 'ominous' also seems implied in the context of the run-up to Adrianople. The breach of the temporal frame with the words "even now" (*nunc usque*) reminded readers that the Goths were still at liberty in the Balkans when Ammianus was writing over a decade later – we may justly see a discreet political complaint. But these words also serve as acknowledgement and intertextual signposting, by suggesting the contrast to other times when fields were covered in bones, in Vergil's ancient Latium, or in the aftermath of the Teutoburger Wald in Tacitus.

Ammianus' intertextuality has too often been seen as ostentatious and of minimal interpretability. Beyond sheer variety, his allusions have a remarkable complexity and capacity to insinuate or to reinforce meaningfully. A comparison of Ammianus' intertextuality with Vergil to that of Tacitus or Silius with the same passages shows great similarities in allusive technique. As far as concerns his relationships with other texts, he should be studied with the same insights as have illuminated earlier Latin literature, rather than in a late-antique ghetto.