

Primary Literature Review

Tacitus, *Germania*, circa. 98 A.D.

Germania (c. 98 AD) was written by Tacitus, a famous Roman historian and political entity whose work is still analyzed by historians today. Tacitus was born in northern Italy in 56 A.D and died in 117 A.D. He was an influential member of Roman society serving as a senator in 81 A.D. and as a consul under Emperor Nerva in 97 A.D. The majority of Tacitus' works that remain today concentrate on the tyranny of the emperors, such as *The Histories* and *The Annals*. Tacitus was revered by founding fathers of the United States, such as John Adams and Thomas Jefferson. Jefferson is quoted as writing in 1808 that "Tacitus I consider the first writer in the world without a single exception. His book is a compound of history and morality of which we have no other example." Historian Will Durant, author of such works as *The Story of Civilization*, wrote "[We must] rank Tacitus among the greatest ... The portraits he draws stand out more clearly, stride the stage more livingly than any others in historical literature." Tacitus is an important part of modern-day historians' knowledge of ancient Rome and other ancient cultures such as those in *Germania*. *Germania* gives the reader a brief glimpse into the culture of several Germanic tribes that have very little written record to study.

Germania describes some of the barbarian tribes which inhabited the area north of the Roman Empire. It describes the region both critically and in admiration depending on the subject he is discussing at the moment. The book begins with a general description of the culture, terrain and inhabitants of the area and concludes with a specific description of certain tribes in more detail. Tacitus explains that the region of *Germania* is situated between the natural barriers of the Rhine River, the Danube River, the mountain ranges separating them from the Dacians and Samaritans and the "Ocean" or Baltic Sea.¹ According to his description, the terrain is "unlovely in scenery," it has a "bitter climate," and it is "dreary to inhabit or even to behold".² The German people were believed to be the natives of the land because Tacitus could not believe anyone else would want to immigrate to the dreary land to live there.³ Tacitus describes the German people as "never being tainted by intermarriage with other nations" and they were said to possess mostly "wild blue eyes, red hair, and huge frames that excel in violent effort."⁴ The environment is either "bristled with woods" or "festered with swamps."⁵

After giving the reader a glimpse of how the people and the land of *Germania* appeared, Tacitus began to discuss the economy and culture of the Germanic people. *Germania* was fertile in grain crops but lacked fruit trees.⁶ The flocks of livestock possessed by the Germanic people

¹ 35.

² 35.

³ 35.

⁴ 36.

⁵ 37.

⁶ 37.

were described by Tacitus as rich in number but mostly they were undersized. He explained however that the number of animals rather than the quality of them was what the Germanic people valued.⁷ They had no great gold or silver deposits and only those tribes nearest to the Empire used these to trade with the Romans.⁸ The inner tribes relied more on bartering than those tribes closer to the Romans and they valued silver coins over gold because they were more common.⁹ After discussing the economy of the German peoples, Tacitus began to discuss their militaristic characteristics. The Germanic people used spears or *frameae* for both close and long-distance fighting.¹⁰ The soldiers were armed with only shields and spears and they either fought naked or were only lightly clad in cloaks.¹¹ Their tactics were simplistic. The cavalry charged straight ahead, and the strength of the Germanic forces was found in their infantry.¹² They used retreat as a tactic and it was not seen as a sign of cowardice. He notes that even in the thick of the fighting the Germanic people recovered their dead from the fray.¹³

The leaders and kings are described by Tacitus in his next paragraph. He writes that the kings came from noble birth and that the leaders were elected based upon acts of valor but even though they are leaders or kings they were not allowed to punish the people. That job belonged to the priests and was only done in obedience to the god they believed presides over battle.¹⁴ The Germanic people were said to revere their women and would bring their wounded to their mothers and wives who would heal them and would encourage the men during battle.¹⁵ Tradition states that many battles were pulled back from the edge of defeat by the women pleading with their soldiers and baring their breasts as they cried out how close they were to enemy enslavement.¹⁶

Tacitus then begins to describe the religious beliefs of the Germanic people. The Germanic people worshiped Mercury above all other gods but they also worshiped Hercules, Mars, and Isis.¹⁷ A major difference between the Roman worship and Germanic worship of these gods however was that the Germanic people felt it unnecessary to “imprison” the gods in a building or representing them with human features, whereas the Romans built temples and statues of the gods.¹⁸ Instead of building temples, the Germanic people consecrated woods or groves for the gods.¹⁹ The casting of lots and divination were important traditions. The casting of lots was a process done by the state priest or the father of a family. They cut fruit tree branches into slivers and marked them with certain symbols. They threw them on the ground, then picked up three at

⁷ 37.

⁸ 37.

⁹ 37.

¹⁰ 37.

¹¹ 37.

¹² 37.

¹³ 37.

¹⁴ 38.

¹⁵ 38.

¹⁶ 38.

¹⁷ 39.

¹⁸ 39.

¹⁹ 39.

random, and followed what they said.²⁰ A peculiar practice of divination used by the Germanic people was riding the sacred white horses and listening to their neighs and snorts to receive word from the gods.²¹ The way they determined if they should go to war with a certain people was to put a prisoner of whomever they are thinking about going to war with into combat with one of their heroes, and if the prisoner won then the people knew not to go to war with them.²² Unlike the Romans, the Germanic people counted time by using nights instead of days.²³

The characteristic that Tacitus seemed to revere most about the Germanic people, as opposed to the Romans, was their idea of marriage. He says that the Germanic people had only one mate and that they were devoted to each other and that adultery was not very widespread in the culture. Tacitus says virginity was highly valued in Germanic society and that the dowry would be given by the husband and not the wife. The Germanic people lived separately from each other and did not live in cities with connecting buildings like the Romans. They were described as wearing short cloaks held together with a brooch or animal skins. The slaves were not treated like slaves were treated in Rome. Instead, they had their own land and families and just paid tribute to their owner. The women and children did all the domestic work while the husbands ate to the point of gluttony and occasionally went hunting.²⁴ The Germanic people considered it impious to turn away strangers from the door, thus they were very hospitable and would give the guests whatever they wanted. When the host ran out they moved on to the next house where the new host had to provide for both guests. Tacitus says there was no pomp about their funerals. If it were a man who had died he was burned on a funeral pyre with his weapons and sometimes his horse, and then that was the end of it.

The second part of the book Tacitus goes from tribe to tribe and describes them in a couple of sentences. Overall, it comes off disjointed. Tacitus explains that the closer the Germanic people are to Rome the more Roman they act. The Batavians are described as the bravest tribe in the region. Tacitus then goes in to greater detail about the Chatti and their customs regarding hair. The Chatti let their hair and facial hair grow and remain unkempt until they slew an enemy in battle, after which they were allowed to cut their hair and shave their beards. Tacitus ends talking about the Germanic people when he reaches the Sitones. His last comments about them are that they are below the level of slaves because they are ruled by a woman. This part of the book is just a description of certain groups of people in Germania, and it gets rather convoluted.

I thought the first part of the book was fairly disorganized and jumped from subject to subject rather quickly and with no real transition. The second part of the book was difficult because I was not sure what Tacitus was saying or whom he was speaking of from sentence to sentence. He was humorous in some parts of the book as when he says that he believes the Germanic people have to be natives of the land because no one else would want to live there.²⁵ I also thought it was

²⁰ 39.

²¹ 39, 40.

²² 40.

²³ 40.

²⁴ 42.

²⁵ 35.

quite humorous when Tacitus was describing the Sitones. He said that the Sitones are alike in every way to the Suiones, except that they are ruled by a woman. This, writes Tacitus, is the extent of their decline- not merely below freedom, but below decent slavery.²⁶ Tacitus praises two parts of the Germanic people's society rather highly. He is very taken with the Germanic people's concept of marriage and with their hospitality. On all other things Tacitus talks rather poorly about the Germanic people in order to glorify Rome. *Germania* was a comparison of Germania and Rome where Tacitus glorified the Germanic traits he thought surpassed the Romans and put down the Germanic traits he believed the Romans were superior in. I thought that the first part of the book gave the reader a good mental image of the wild land of Germania and the people who inhabited it, although the second half shifted too quickly from tribe to tribe.

Will Alexander

²⁶ 57.

