Ephemeris

Volume 5 Article 4

2004

Tacitus' *Germania* as a Commentary on Moral Decay in Roman Society

Nicole Miller
University College Cork, Ireland

Tacitus' Germania *as a Commentary on Moral Decay in Roman Society*

By Nicole Miller, '05
University College Cork, Ireland

Far off lands were in ancient Rome, as in modern western society, the places of wondrous creatures and mystical happenings. Rome, as centre of the empire, was considered the norm and urbanization the model of civilization. The farther a location was from Rome, the more mysterious its inhabitants were considered. This attitude was part of a well-established tradition of geographical thought reaching back to Alexander the Great. Stories inspired by supposed reports from these lands prompted writings about these peoples—quite literally in the Greek, ethnography. In this tradition of ethnography is Tacitus' *Germania*, a detailed account of the peoples living in the unconquered lands near the North Sea. Read within the tradition of ethnography, its historical context and with its companion book the *Agricola*, the subtext of Tacitus' *Germania* is a criticism of the state of moral decay in Imperial Rome. In his descriptions, Tacitus creates an underlying comparison to Roman mores and in making these distinctions creates a platform of criticism against its current state of moral degeneracy.

In order to understand the individual text of the *Germania,* the tradition within which it was written must be examined. Attitudes toward distant peoples applied to physical as well as temporal remoteness. Thus descriptions of remote peoples often parallel those of the first humans. In the tradition of ethnography, two approaches were taken in describing fantastic peoples—ethnocentrism and inverted ethnocentrism. Ethnocentrism "denotes a construct of space which sees the center of the world as the best or most advanced location, and therefore demotes distant peoples to the

status of unworthy savages."[1] Conversely, inversion of ethnocentrism "envisions foreigners growing not less but more virtuous in proportion to their distance from the [Roman] center, [often] depicted as the most morally degenerate spot on earth."[2] The occurrence of such varying depictions of the same peoples invites further examination of the authors' intentions. In his book, *The Edges of the Earth in Ancient Thought*, James S. Romm asserts that, "Geographer's science and storyteller's art, in any period of antiquity, could not be fully detached from each other,"[3] and, "That nearly all geography, in antiquity, can be read as a from of literature."[4] Thus, geographies and ethnographies can be read as any other form of literature and become subject to an author's agenda.

If writings are taken in their historical contexts, it becomes quite clear that authors are projecting their own view of society onto their interpretation of foreign peoples. For example, Cicero, writing during the Republic, describes the first peoples with an air of disdain stating:

> Men, in the days before either natural or civil law had been drawn up, wandered dispersed and scattered about the fields and that each possessed no more than he could seize or keep by his own strength, through killing or wounding others. [5]

---

[1] Romm, James S. *The Edges of the Earth in Ancient Thought*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992: 46.
[2] Romm, James S. *The Edges of the Earth in Ancient Thought*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992: 47.
[3] Ibid.: 5.
[4] Ibid.: 7.
[5] Cicero, De Officiis 2:4.

In contrast to his bleak descriptions of primitivism are his declaration of the triumph of modern man and civilized life, he commented:

> In all these respects the civilized life of men is far removed from the level of subsistence and comfort of the animals. And without the association of men, cities could neither have been built nor peopled, as a result of which laws and customs were established and then the equitable determination of rights, and a settled discipline of life. When these were assured there followed a more human spirit and the sense of what is morally becoming, so that life was more secure, and that, by giving and receiving, by mutual exchange of goods and services, we were able to satisfy our needs.[6]

Cicero's descriptions of the evolution of civilization indicate an ethnocentric world-view: all that is Roman is good, all that is not Roman is not good. Conversely, Juvenal, writing during the decline of the empire, describes the decay of society as "an age worse than that of iron."[7] He further laments the loss of simplicity and declares, "Once the aborigines did live according to this rule of life, before Saturn feeling laid aside the crown to take up the rustic sickle, when Juno was a little girl and Jupiter still a private citizen in the caves of Ida."[8] He implies that although man once lived in a state of morality, he has degenerated beyond all recognition.

---

[6] Ibid.: 2:15
[7] Juvenal Satire 13, 28-59
[8] Ibid.

Juvenal's view reflects inverted ethnocentrism: the centre of immorality is Rome, and locations outside of the centre are inherently better. Cicero and Juvenal were describing the same original peoples and the same period of history, yet the underlying messages of each text are startlingly different. The divergence of these descriptions of primitivism illustrates how manipulations of a text can support an ideology.

This manipulation is key to understanding the works of Tacitus. The *Agricola* appears to be a biographical account of Tacitus' father-in-law, Gnaesus Julius Agricola, late governor of Britain, but serves rather as a platform for criticism of the decay of Imperial Government. Tacitus' aim is made quite clear in the very structure of the book; he does not even name the title character until the fourth chapter. He opens the books with a series of significant and blatant attacks on the decay of Rome, especially that of the emperor. One section describes a book burning ordered by the emperor:

> In those fires doubtless the Government imagined that it could silence the voice of Rome and annihilate the freedom of the Senate and men's knowledge of the truth. They even went on to banish the professors of philosophy and exile all honourable accomplishments so that nothing decent might anywhere confront them. We have indeed set up a record of subservience. Rome of old explored the utmost limits of freedom; we have plumbed the depths of slavery, robbed as we are by informers even of the right to exchange ideas in conversation. We should have lost our memories as well

> as our tongues had it been as easy to forget as to be silent.[9]

These first chapters reveal his intention to break the silence concerning the state of the Empire. When he begins to address the intended biography, Tacitus does not claim impartiality and declares that the reader should pardon "the loyal affection to which it bears witness."[10] In fact, Tacitus defines Agricola as a paradigm for Roman leadership. During his first military apprenticeship in Britain, Agricola established his character. Tacitus tells the reader that:

> He got to know his province and made himself known to the troops. He learned from the experts and chose the best models to follow. He never sought a duty for self-advertisement, never shirked one through cowardice. He acted always with energy and a sense of responsibility.[11]

Tacitus expands on the theme of leadership as he describes Agricola's military successes in the conquering and subjugation of the Britains. In these accounts highlighting Agricola's accomplishments as a leader, there is an underlying contrast to his contemporaries, such as "Agricola, however, […] had learned from the experience of others that arms can effect little if injustice follows in their train."[12] In this

---

[9] Tacitus, Cornelius. "Germania", *The Agricola and the Germania*. Translated by H. Mattingly. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1970: 52.
[10] Ibid.: 53.
[11] Ibid.: 55.
[12] Ibid.: 70.

description, Tacitus manages to simultaneously praise Agricola, and criticize the Emperor. Although trumpeted as a eulogy for Agricola, the text becomes a condemnation of the decay of leadership in Imperial Rome.

The precedent of the *Agricola* as a criticism of Imperial leadership and policy allows for a reading of the *Germania* as an extension of this commentary. Very little had been written about these tribes, shrouded in mystery. In fact, only Julius Caesar had deemed them as important enough to discuss as distinct peoples. These descriptions were written only as a side note to his campaigns in Gaul, so Tacitus' *Germania* was the first exclusive treatment of the Germanii. Thus the book would have drawn great interest—the very title of the work recalling a myriad of images for the Roman *literati*. When all Europe stood unified under the banner of the Senate and People of Rome, Germania remained untamed. Germania represented the last fierce and savage land within immediate Roman reach, and it gained contemporary importance for Tacitus' peers as renewed Imperial campaigns were being waged in Germania.[13] The significance of this campaign was great as Germania also represented the geographical limit of the empire. Augustus had once hoped to expand the borders of the empire to the banks of the Elbe, but Germania proved impossible to subdue.[14] In the early imperial years, "limitless, ever-expanding empire was the prize which the new regime offered its citizens, as both a recompense for and a distraction from the loss of

[13] Mattingly, H. Introduction to *The Agricola and the Germania*, by Cornelius Tacitus. Translated by H. Mattingly. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1970.
[14] Ibid.

republican government."[15] If the expansion of the Empire was to be the definition of success, Germania in effect, became a symbol of the failings of the Imperial Government. Therefore in writing an ethnography of the Germans, Tacitus was in fact detailing the deficiency of the empire.

Germania was both a symbol of imperial deficiency and a manifestation of all that was un-Roman. Although Britain was in fact physically removed from the rest of the empire, it was the untamed stretches of Germania, which represented barbarism in the Roman imagination. Germania represented a land inhabited by brutish peoples on the edges of the earth near the terrifying Ocean. In his description of the German landscape, Tacitus places the pillars of Heracles in the North Sea just beyond the coast of Germania. To the Romans, the Columns of Heracles were "a vivid symbol of the gateway or barrier between inner and outer worlds."[16] Thus, Tacitus, in placing the Columns in the North Sea, rather than the traditional Straits of Gibraltar, was attempting to illustrate the remoteness of the North Sea and emphasize the remoteness of the Germanii. The Latin Tacitus chooses to use in his description of the North Sea further emphasizes his point. In the

> use of *adversus*, a term normally applied to antipodal worlds, and the phrase *ab orbe nostro*—which can be taken to mean simply 'from our region' but which also carries overtones of the more sweeping *orbis terrarum*—Tacitus

[15] Romm, James S. *The Edges of the Earth in Ancient Thought*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992: 137.
[16] Romm, James S. *The Edges of the Earth in Ancient Thought*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992: 17.

> stresses the idea that the North Sea is entirely separate from the *oikoumene*.[17]

Germania was an *alius orbis* to the Roman mind, and Tacitus plays on this idea in his further descriptions of the landscape. In the use of the phrase "*informem terres* he uses a word that meant, simultaneously, 'shapeless' *and* 'dismal.'" In the Roman mind, "The sign of a pleasing landscape was necessarily that which had been formed, upon which man had left his civilizing and fructifying mark."[18] As the Germanii did not practice any form of agriculture and lived in such an inhospitable climate, they were, to the Romans, the antithesis of civilization.

In the eyes of Tacitus, this "inversion of Roman values in the Teutonic woods is not without its redeeming features."[19] Tacitus gives a "portrait of Germania as a not-Rome […] completed by its relative indifference to property and elaborate distinctions of rank, and its marked preference for spontaneous forms of community: communal feasting and hospitality."[20] Throughout his descriptions of German customs, Tacitus explicitly insulted the Roman *luxuria*. Among these corruptions were gluttony, materialism, selection of unworthy leaders, undue deification of women, promiscuity and childlessness. *Luxuria* is most apparent in the infamous gluttony and materialism of the Romans. Tacitus emphasizes the German rejection of materialism as he states:

---

[17] Ibid.: 142
[18] Schama, Simon. "*Der Holzweg*: The track through the woods" *In Landscape and Memory*. London: Harper Collins, 1995: 81.
[19] Ibid.: 85.
[20] Ibid.: 86.

> The natives take less pleasure than most people do in possessing and handling these metals; indeed, one can see in their houses silver vessels, which have been presented to chieftains or to ambassadors travelling abroad, put to the same everyday uses as earthenware.[21]

He carries this emphasis on German simplicity further in describing the German food as "plain—wild fruit, fresh game, and curdled milk. They satisfy their hunger without any elaborate cuisine or appetizers."[22] That is to say, they do not corrupt themselves with the extravagant feasts characteristic of *luxuria*. Tacitus develops this theme of moderation forward into his description of the German reverence of women. Although "they believe that there resides in women an element of holiness and a gift of prophecy; and so they do not scorn to ask their advice, or lightly disregard their replies", this regard remains "untainted by servile flattery or any pretence of turning women into goddesses."[23] Tacitus' clever use of examples from Roman society, emphasize that he is chastising the Roman excess, by highlighting the German moderation. Tacitus delves deeper into the issue of morality associated with women as he details the customs valuing mothers and the family. As opposed to the Roman tradition of employing a wet-nurse, in Germania "every mother feeds her child at the breast and does not depute the task to maids or nurses."[24] In fact,

---

[21]Tacitus, Cornelius. "Germania", *The Agricola and the Germania*. Translated by H. Mattingly. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1970: 105.
[22] Ibid.: 121.
[23] Ibid.: 108.
[24] Ibid.: 118.

"there is nothing to be gained by childlessness in Germany."[25] In these statements, Tacitus criticizes the absurdity occurring in Roman society when fortune hunters attempted to ingratiate themselves through gifts and attention to those about to die with no heirs. For Tacitus, Germania illustrated morality and Rome utter decay.

In his praise of the Germanii, he bluntly declares, "good morality is more effective in Germany than good laws are elsewhere."[26] By saying this, he alludes to the Augustan social legislation that had failed and the utter degeneration of Roman society that had followed. Taking the path of inverted ethnocentrism, Tacitus followed in the tradition of ethnography of melding the arts of geography and literature. The end result of his efforts was a condemnation of Roman moral decay.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Mattingly, H. Introduction to *The Agricola and the Germania*, by Cornelius Tacitus. Translated by H. Mattingly. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1970.

Romm, James S. *The Edges of the Earth in Ancient Thought*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992.

Schama, Simon. "*Der Holzweg*: The track through the woods" *In Landscape and Memory*. London: Harper Collins, 1995.

---

[25] Ibid.: 119.

[26] Tacitus, Cornelius. "Germania", *The Agricola and the Germania*. Translated by H. Mattingly. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1970: 118.

Tacitus, Cornelius, *The Agricola and the Germania*. Translated by H. Mattingly. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1970.