

Tacitus' *Germania* and Modern Germany*

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This essay is based upon one of the slenderest volumes of Latin literature. In the most recent critical edition it covers about twenty-five pages, a total of some 750 lines.¹ And yet this tiny work, styled an *aureus libellus* upon discovery in the Renaissance, has had an impact upon the life of a modern people unrivaled by any other product of classical antiquity.

Publius Cornelius Tacitus, who was to become Rome's greatest historian, was born, in all likelihood, early in the reign of the Emperor Nero.² His childhood was passed under that strange, debauched, and cruel ruler, whose enforced suicide in the year 68 was followed by the rapid succession of four emperors amid the horrors and cruelties of civil war. The successful claimant to the throne, Vespasian, established a dynasty which proved short-lived; he was succeeded by his two sons, Titus and Domitian. Tacitus entered upon a public career under the father and was advanced by each of the sons, until he ultimately reached the highest office open to a member of the senatorial order, the consulate. But the principate of Domitian proved to be a disastrous period for the upper classes of society, when the emperor persecuted the best men and women and, so to speak, virtue itself.

Tacitus was in his early forties when he published his first work, in the year 98, the biography of his father-in-law, Agricola, who had gained fame by his conquests of Britain. Although Tacitus' career had not been stymied by Domitian, the emotional and intellectual cost had been high. He described this period in despairing tones:

What if, for a period of fifteen years, a great span of human life, many men perished by natural deaths, and all the most capable because of the

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¹ A. Onnerfors (ed.), *P. Corneli Taciti Germania* (Stuttgart 1983).

² For a general discussion of the historian's life and career, see my *An Introduction to Tacitus* (Athens, GA 1975) 12-21.

emperor's cruelty. We few indeed have outlived not only others but also, if I may use the expression, ourselves, with so many years plucked from the middle of our lives, years in which those of us who were young reached maturity, and the mature approached the very limits of extreme old age, in silence.³

The publication of the *Agricola* was followed almost immediately by that of the *Germania*, which seems best understood as an ethnographical treatise. We of course cannot know whether Tacitus had an ulterior motive in writing this work. Many scholars think that it contains veiled advice, or even a warning, for the newly-destined emperor, Trajan, who was then resident on the Rhine frontier, by underscoring the great threat from the Germans and suggesting that they were Rome's greatest potential danger. Coincidentally, he could belittle Domitian's claim to have pacified Germany. If this had been Tacitus' purpose, it proved unsuccessful, since Trajan preferred to retain the status quo in Germany and even echo Domitian's boast, in his first minting, by issuing coins with the legend *Germania pacata*, "the pacification of Germany." The emperor thought that his military operations and aspirations should be directed against Dacia, the modern Rumania, in order to stabilize the Danube frontier, and then, less than a decade later, against Parthia in the east, a campaign from which he did not return.

Yet it seems unlikely that a mere senator, and one perhaps with little military experience, would have undertaken to offer advice to the renowned general. Nor does it appear probable that the monograph was a preliminary effort to bring together material about Germany to be used later in his larger works, in graphic detail and vividness. But, whatever the reason, Tacitus was clearly intrigued by this "noble" people to such a degree that he determined to pass on the results of his experiences and researches to the educated aristocracy of Rome.

There is no direct evidence that Tacitus ever saw Germany himself, but I think it by no means unlikely that he had seen the land and perhaps even commanded a legion there.⁴ Beyond that, his prime source was Pliny the Elder's history of the wars in Germany. The historian also had at his disposal information circulated by merchants and travelers who had visited the north. Writing the ethnography of a country or people had a lengthy tradition, going back at least to the Greek historian Herodotus in the fifth century B.C. With this work Tacitus tried his hand at the genre.

As mentioned earlier, the work is very brief; its structure is comparably simple. It falls naturally into two halves of almost equal proportions; the first gives a general treatment of the land and its people, their customs and practices in chapters 1-27, the second, in chapters 28-46, describes the individual tribes.

³ *Agricola* 3. 2.

⁴ See my "Tacitus, Trier and the Treveri," *Classical Journal* 83 (1987-88) 233-39.

But each of these main divisions can be further sub-divided. The general treatment devotes the first five chapters to the geographical description of the land and the origin of the people. The next ten chapters deal with public institutions, the following twelve with those of private life. These two sections are almost precisely identical in length.

Nor does Tacitus discuss the individual tribes randomly. Chapters 28–37 deal with the tribes of the west and northwest, generally following the line of the Rhine from south to north. The remainder of the work covers the Suebic tribes of the east and north, essentially following the line of the Danube from west to east before he jumps, as inevitably he must, to the almost fairy-tale lands of the far north. Again, both parts are almost identical in length, although the amount of detail that Tacitus can present gradually diminishes as he moves ever farther away from the parts of Germany well known to the Romans through warfare and commerce.⁵

There are three passages to which I wish to give particular attention, for they were destined to have enormous impact upon the descendants of those Germans in times much closer to our own time. They appear in chapters 4, 33, and 37.

The crucial sentence of chapter 4 is the first, which states, "I personally incline to the views of those who think that the peoples of Germany have not been polluted by any marriages with other tribes and that they have existed as a particular people, pure and only like themselves." In Tacitus' words, the Germans are a *propria et sincera et tantum sui similis gens*. These last words may strike some with a sense of foreboding.

In chapter 33, Tacitus describes the extirpation of a Germanic tribe by its neighbors, and the gods even allowed the Romans to gaze upon this spectacle as if watching games in the arena. He concludes with a prayer, "Let there continue and endure, I pray, among foreign peoples, if not affection for us, at least hatred for one another, since, as the destiny of empire drives us on, fortune can furnish us nothing greater than the discord of the enemy." Does Tacitus hereby express confidence in Rome's imperial destiny or fear and trepidation before the power of the Germanic peoples?⁶

Chapter 37 is a long excursus on Rome's two centuries and more of warfare and trial to conquer the Germans. Since the last years of the second century B.C., Tacitus says, they have tested Rome's mettle and fought on equal terms with her armies; the freedom of the Germans is a greater danger than the royal dynasty of the Parthians, and no other enemy in time past had proved so unconquerable. Indeed, although Tacitus only briefly mentions it and does not name the great enemy, it may well be that the defeat inflicted by Arminius upon Varus and his three legions in the Teutoburg Forest in

⁵ This discussion of the *Germania* is based upon that in my book (above, note 2).

⁶ The literature on this vexed question is enormous. See my "Tacitus and the Fall of the Roman Empire," *Historia* 17 (1968) 37–50, and "Tacitus' *Germania*—A Third of a Century of Scholarship," *Quaderni di Storia* 17 (1983) 227–30.

A.D. 9 was the most potent setback in Rome's history. Previous disasters had only delayed Rome's seemingly inevitable victory. But Varus' overwhelming loss fundamentally changed Roman foreign policy. Augustus became content, perforce, with the Rhine frontier. Future operations against the Germans were generally concerned rather with consolidation of this Rhine boundary than with expansion to the east.⁷ The Roman biographer Suetonius tells the pathetic story of the aged emperor wandering around his home, repeating again and again, "Varus, Varus, give me back my legions."⁸ The effect upon all subsequent history of the reduction of Rome's German aspirations has been very significant.

Tacitus grants, at the end of this chapter, that, when in recent times the Germans have been beaten, "they appeared in triumphal processions rather than being actually conquered," *triumphati magis quam victi sunt*. Two hundred and ten years of struggle with only this to show. Are the Germans indeed unconquerable when matched with the power of Rome?

We do not know what impact, if any, the *Germania* had upon Tacitus' contemporaries, nor, indeed, whether it was widely read at all. Tacitus' coeval and admirer, the younger Pliny, wrote him about a decade later, "I believe that your histories will be immortal: a prophecy which will surely prove correct."⁹ The work to which Pliny referred was that which we know as the *Histories*, a large undertaking which covered the years from the beginning of 69 to the death of the Emperor Domitian in 96 and which, together with the later *Annals*, which spanned the years from the death of Augustus in 14 to that of Nero in 68, furnished an examination of most of the principate's first century. But Pliny's enthusiastic forecast was not fulfilled. Tacitus was evidently little read in the years that followed, in part because his style was hard and his language often unusual, in part because the political realities changed, and in part because literary taste preferred simpler biography, as offered by Suetonius, to his more searching and penetrating narrative. There are few sources which suggest knowledge of Tacitus in later antiquity, only one of which shows that the *Germania* was being read.¹⁰

As with so many classical works, survival was extremely tenuous. Tacitus' three minor works owe their existence today to one manuscript, known as the *Hersfeldensis*, perhaps written at nearby Fulda in the tenth century (both Hersfeld and Fulda are in central Germany).¹¹ It was known in the 1420s and 1430s to some of the great Renaissance manuscript hunters and was brought to Rome in 1455. It soon played an important role in a

⁷ C. M. Wells, *The German Policy of Augustus* (Oxford 1972).

⁸ *Divus Augustus* 23. 2: *Quintili Vare, legiones redde.*

⁹ *Epistulae* 7. 33. 1: *Auguror, nec me fallit augurium, historias tuas immortales futuras.*

¹⁰ R. Martin, *Tacitus* (Berkeley and Los Angeles 1981) 236-43.

¹¹ M. Winterbottom in L. D. Reynolds (ed.), *Texts and Transmissions* (Oxford 1983) 410-11, offers a somewhat different conclusion.

significant political controversy, invoked by Aeneas Silvius Piccolomini, the later Pope Pius II.¹²

The occasion was his response in 1458 to a letter which Martin Mair, chancellor of the Bishop of Mainz, had written him on August 31, 1457, in which the chancellor accused the Roman church of causing the Holy Roman Empire to decline from its former position of power to the status of a servant, whose misery and poverty were exacerbated by the need to pay taxes. Mair compared the present day with centuries past, in the Middle Ages. In an essay entitled *De ritu, situ, moribus et condicione Germaniae descriptio*, based upon Tacitus' monograph, the only copy of which he now possessed, Piccolomini chose a different basis of comparison, namely the present opposed to the Germany of antiquity. It is here that Tacitus proves so valuable, for Piccolomini is able to show that it is the church which has brought the Germans from barbarism to their present level of culture.

"In this way he changed the situation fundamentally in his own favor. If one compares the past of the ancient Germans with Aeneas's Renaissance present, the Roman church, which Mair in his comparison had blamed for the decline, became an important factor of progress and cultural perfection. Thus, it is quite evident that Aeneas did not share Tacitus's fascination with the Germans; this would hardly have fitted in with his rhetorical approach. He was obliged to omit the sequence of positive statements Tacitus had made about the Germans. His task was instead to emphasize all those elements in the text that placed German life in an unfavorable light."¹³

Soon after this exchange of correspondence, Aeneas Silvius Piccolomini was elected Pope and took the name Pius II. His pontificate lasted six years, but his influence on relations with Germany and acceptance of the *Germania* as a document of contemporary import continued. In 1471, his 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 endeavored 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 both financial and military. Campano undertook "to stir up this politically apathetic public and arouse its interest in a vigorous campaign against the Turks. To achieve this he painted a colorful picture of the military glory of the ancient Germans, who not only

¹² M. Fuhrmann, "Einige Dokumente zur Rezeption der taciteischen 'Germania'," *Der altsprachliche Unterricht* 21, 1 (1978) 39-49; L. Krapf, "The Literary Rediscovery of Tacitus's *Germania*," *Res Publica Litterarum* 5, 1 (1980) 137-43; and, for greater detail, Krapf, *Germanenmythos und Reichsideologie. Frühhumanistische Rezeptionsweise der taciteischen "Germania"* (Tübingen 1979); U. Muhlack, "Die *Germania* im deutschen Nationalbewusstsein vor dem 19. Jahrhundert," in H. Jankuhn and D. Timpe (eds.), *Beiträge zum Verständnis der Germania des Tacitus* (Göttingen 1989) 128-54.

¹³ Krapf, "Literary Rediscovery" (previous note) 137-38.

kept foreign intruders away from their own country, but also invaded the territories of other peoples."¹⁴

Campano wanted his audience to identify with their famous and highly praised ancestors. Like his uncle, Campano compared past and present, but, unlike him, he showed the similarity between the two ages, not the differences. Above all, military prowess comes to the fore; he describes the ancient civilization as *bellica, militaria, castrensia*, "devoted to war, the army, and the camp," and undertakes to place his contemporaries in the same mold.

The *editio princeps* of the *Germania* appeared in Venice in 1470, three years before the first German printing in Nürnberg. In 1496 Aeneas Silvius' essay was published, and it was this event which gave an enormous impetus to enthusiasm for, and study of, Tacitus' monograph.¹⁵ Numerous editions and books concerned with Germany, its peoples, and its history followed rapidly.

In the year 1492, Conrad Celtis delivered an inaugural address when he was appointed to the faculty of the University of Ingolstadt. This *oratio*, based upon the *Germania*, invoked the military prowess of the ancient Germans in support of the Empire against the Papacy.¹⁶ Eight years later he presented the first series of lectures on the *Germania* when he had moved to Vienna.¹⁷ 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 tangible remains. They began the idealization of the Germans as well as research on them. Ulrich von Hutten, in his *Arminius* of 1519 or 1520, which was published only in 1529, established the cult of hero-worship of Arminius, the Cheruscan chieftain, which has continued into the present day.¹⁸ Of him Tacitus wrote in the *Annals*, granting him a splendid obituary, "He was unquestionably the liberator of Germany, who attacked Rome not in her early days but in her prime. He fought indecisive battles but was unconquered in war."¹⁹

Keep in mind that this is the period of German opposition to the Roman church, with focus upon the great figure of Martin Luther. The Reformation, which established a church essentially Germanic, welcomed

¹⁴ Krapf (previous note) 138.

¹⁵ K. C. Schellhase, *Tacitus in Renaissance Political Thought* (Chicago 1976) 32-33.

¹⁶ Schellhase (previous note) 34-37.

¹⁷ L. W. Spitz, *Conrad Celtis. The German Arch-Humanist* (Cambridge, MA 1957) 66-67; L. Franz, "450 Jahre Forschung über die Germania des Tacitus," *Anzeiger für die Altertumswissenschaft* 3 (1950) 61-64.

¹⁸ Fuhrmann (above, note 12); R. Kuehnemund, *Arminius or the Rise of a National Symbol in Literature* (Chapel Hill, NC 1953); W. Laqueur, *Germany Today. A Personal Report* (London 1985) chap. 6: "Arminius or Patriotism Rediscovered"; A. Demandt, "Was wäre Europa ohne die Antike?," in P. Kneissl and V. Losemann (eds.), *Alte Geschichte und Wissenschaftsgeschichte: Festschrift Karl Christ* (Darmstadt 1988) 120.

¹⁹ *Annales* 2. 88. 2. The crucial words are *liberator haud dubie Germaniae . . . proeliis ambiguus, bello non victus*.

support from earlier days which represented their people as at least a match for the ancestors of the present-day Italians.

We now leave the period of humanism, which lasted for much of the sixteenth century and proved to be the first of two great eras which drew a sense of nationalism and pride from the *Germania*.²⁰ No other people of Europe could boast of an ancient literary text which described its prehistory; Caesar had written briefly of the Gauls and Germans, and Tacitus himself had devoted a brief section to the ancient Britons in the *Agricola*. No other ancient text so affected the outlook of a modern people, not yet a nation and not destined to become one for some three centuries. The disparate Germans could through Tacitus share a common heritage.

The second period in which the *Germania* played a major role in the intellectual and patriotic life of the Germans covered about a century and a quarter, from the end of the Napoleonic wars to the collapse of the Third Reich. The Wars of Liberation against Napoleon gave particular impetus to a sense of national feeling. This was exemplified by the desire for a national monument²¹ and an emphasis upon the qualities and characteristics that made the Germans different, as they themselves thought, from other Europeans.

Monuments were erected in many places around Germany, above all in Bavaria. King Ludwig I built a German Hall of Fame in a replica of the Parthenon, high above the Danube east of Regensburg, called Walhalla, and then, upon its completion, began a monument to celebrate German victories over the French Emperor at Kelheim, southwest of Regensburg, the model of which, at least for the interior, was the Pantheon.

Neither, however, proved to be representative of Germany as a whole. But in 1875, four years after the establishment by Bismarck of the German Empire and five years after her crushing defeat of the French at Sedan, a monumental statue of Arminius was dedicated in the Teutoburg Forest. The greatest of all Rome's opponents, who stood for northern resistance to Latin mastery and who had been transformed into a genuine folk-hero by Ulrich von Hutten, now possessed tangible existence. He was more than a match for the statue of Vercingetorix constructed by the Emperor Louis Napoleon at Alesia, site of the last Gallic resistance to Caesar in the year 52 B. C. The French could celebrate a heroic but ultimately futile achievement; the Romans had conquered. The French had their Caesar to sing of the bravery of the ancient Gauls and could be reminded of it in central France. But the Germans of the First Reich could outdo their defeated and despised enemy on

²⁰ Fuhrmann (above, note 12); P. Burke, "Tacitism," in T. A. Dorey (ed.), *Tacitus* (London 1969) 149-71.

²¹ T. Nipperdey, "Nationalidee und Nationaldenkmal im 19. Jahrhundert," *Historische Zeitschrift* 206 (1968) 529-85 = *Gesellschaft, Kultur, Theorie. Gesammelte Aufsätze zur neueren Geschichte* (Göttingen 1976) 133-73, 432-39. See also my "IMPERIUM ROMANUM, DEUTSCHES REICH: The Evocation of Antique Symbolism," in R. F. Sutton, Jr. (ed.), *Daidalikon: Studies in Memory of R. V. Schoder, S. J.* (Wauconda, IL 1989) 29-39.

two counts: *their* hero had been victorious,²² and they had Tacitus, whose *Germania* sang the praises of the liberty and courage of the Germanic tribes of old.

As the French Emperor had been responsible for the archaeological investigation of many aspects and sites of the battles and campaigns described by Caesar, so now students of Germanic antiquity undertook to check every one of Tacitus' statements against the evidence of archaeology. This produced some masterpieces of scholarship, almost monstrous in their bulk, such as Karl Müllenhoff's commentary,²³ which covered 751 pages. (I remind you that the *Germania* is about twenty-five pages long.) In an era of aroused nationalism, Tacitus offered a return to the origins of the German people. It was a fundamental text for understanding German aspirations in the period which saw the realization of national unity. It constituted an important basis for the development of "Deutsche Altertumskunde." It presented themes which aroused modern passions: affection for the primitive and the uncorrupted, idealization of a past which appeared more creative and poetic, the quest for the origins of the Germanic "Volksgeist," uniquely German characteristics. More and more emphasis was put upon the statement that the Germans were a race apart, *gens tantum sui similis*, which became dogma and represented the superiority of the Germans over the other peoples of Europe.²⁴

²² On the two sides of the statue's uplifted sword are inscribed the words *Deutsche Einigkeit meine Stärke* and *Meine Stärke Deutschlands Macht* ("German unity is my strength, my strength is Germany's might."). This expression of unity referred rather to the modern era than the first century A.D.

²³ Karl Müllenhoff (1818–84) was the author of the *Deutsche Altertumskunde*, originally intended to cover six volumes. The commentary on *Die Germania des Tacitus* was the fourth, published posthumously only in 1900.

²⁴ G. L. Mosse, *The Crisis of German Ideology* (New York 1964) 67–68:

The sense of a glorious past played a leading role in both the old and the New Romanticism. After all, the primary condition of a Volk was its rootedness in nature—an attribute not to be attained overnight. Rootedness implied antiquity, an ancient people set in an equally ancient landscape, which by now bore the centuries-old imprint of the people's soul. . . . Where Tacitus was primarily concerned with contrasting the Germanic virtues of fresh strength and endurance with increasing Roman degeneracy, Volkish authors took the contrast at face value and extended the favorable descriptions of the Germans to their culture, their racial stock and purity, as well as to their religious outlook and mythology. . . . (The Germans) had retained the distinction of being a special Volk.

See also M. Mazza, "La 'Germania' di Tacito: etnografia, storiografia e ideologia nella cultura tedesca dell'Ottocento," in F. Gori and C. Questa (eds.), *La Fortuna di Tacito dal Sec. XV ad Oggi* (Urbino 1979) 167–217; note particularly (p. 175):

nell'era dei nazionalismi, il ritorno a Tacito ed ai Germani aveva un senso ben preciso: era il ritorno alle origini profonde della nazione tedesca. Sotto questo profilo la *Germania* tacitiana si può considerare un testo fondamentale per comprendere le aspirazioni del popolo tedesco nel periodo che vide la realizzazione dell'unità nazionale.

I wish now to leap over a period of about a half century, from the intoxicating age of glory and triumph exemplified by Bismarck to the despair and resentment of the first World War and its aftermath, when the revulsion with which her former enemies regarded Germany caused a resurgence in national feeling. It is a tale which, for my purposes, focuses upon one man, a member of the leading university.

At the end of the nineteenth century and on into the twentieth, Germany stood above all other countries in the study of classical antiquity, *Klassische Altertumswissenschaft*, and the crown jewel among German universities was Berlin. The professor for Latin studies was Eduard Norden, who came to Berlin in 1906 with a reputation gained by a superb study of Greek and Latin prose style and soon came to be recognized as one of the two or three most eminent Latinists in the world.²⁵

As a youth, Norden had become interested in the antiquity of his land, but it was only after some thirty years had passed that he once again devoted himself to the study of Tacitus' *Germania*, stimulated by an excursion along some parts of the Roman *limes* which took place in 1913. The war which soon began incited both patriotism and enthusiasm as he undertook an examination of the essay not from an archaeological point of view but from a literary one.

In 1920 appeared his great book, the most significant yet produced on the subject, *Die Germanische Urgeschichte in Tacitus Germania*.²⁶ It was, and remains today, a work of astounding acumen and control of all classical evidence which evoked some surprising responses, responses which dismayed Norden and can now be seen as precursors of the dreadful period of the thirties.

Norden examined the broad tradition of ancient ethnographic writing and thereby brought a new focus to study of the *Germania*. He showed that many of the characteristics and traits which Tacitus assigned the Germans could be found in earlier narratives: the description of individual German customs paralleled that of the Persians in the pages of Herodotus and the famous formula which set the Germans apart from other peoples, *gens*

²⁵ This great work was *Die antike Kunstprosa vom VI. Jahrhundert v. Chr. bis in die Zeit der Renaissance* (Leipzig and Berlin 1898). For discussions of his life and ambiance see F. W. Lenz, "Erinnerungen an Eduard Norden," *Antike und Abendland* 7 (1958) 159-71 and "Eduard Nordens Leistung für die Altertumswissenschaft," *Das Altertum* 6 (1960) 245-54 (these articles were reprinted in Lenz's *Opuscula Selecta* [Amsterdam 1972] 214-26 and 251-60); W. Abel, "Studium Berolinense 1924-31. II: Eduard Norden (21. 9. 1868-13. 7. 1941)," *Gymnasium* 91 (1984) 449-84; W. Jaeger, "Classical Philology at the University of Berlin: 1870 to 1945," in *Five Essays* (Montreal 1966) 47-74; and the essays on Norden and Berlin by E. Mensching in *Nugae zur Philologie-Geschichte* (Berlin 1987), *Nugae zur Philologie-Geschichte* II (Berlin 1989), and subsequently in *Latein und Griechisch in Berlin*. Norden's only rivals were A. E. Housman and Richard Heinze.

²⁶ Leipzig and Berlin: B. G. Teubner; subsequent editions with corrections appeared in 1922 and 1923. A fourth edition was issued in 1959 by Teubner, now located in Stuttgart, based upon the first, with addenda and corrigenda from the second and third grouped at the end.

tantum sui similis, had already been applied to the Scythians and the Egyptians.

What Norden attempted to do was to fit many of Tacitus' statements into a literary tradition that had antecedents well back in Greek literature and which owed a great debt to Posidonius, a Greek historian and philosopher of the age of Cicero, for its impact upon Latin literature and Roman history. He thereby removed the uniqueness of the *aureus libellus* from any discussion of the Germans as a people unlike any other. In the bitter years following the conclusion of World War I, when so many felt that the *Vaterland* had been stabbed in the back, such a challenge to tradition and German supremacy in historical dignity was almost certain to evoke opposition.

As early as November 1921, when Norden wrote the preface to the second edition of his book, only eighteen months after he had written the preface to the first, he felt compelled to devote about half his space to a defense against precisely these charges, and concluded:

Also werden wir nicht aufhören, die Taciteische Schrift als ein Quellenwerk ersten Ranges zu betrachten, sie besteht auch in dem neuen Rahmen, den ich ihr zu geben suchte, die Probe auf Vollwertigkeit durchaus. Jede Angabe, die der sein Worte genau wägende Schriftsteller auf Grund besten Quellenmaterials macht, verträgt die Goldwage.²⁷

Norden knew beforehand that his conclusions would not be popular. In a two-page digression he writes, "Die Folgerung, die sich aus den vorgetragenen Tatsachen ergibt, ist für die germanische Altertumskunde, soweit sie sich auf der Taciteischen Germania aufbaut, nicht besonders erfreulich."²⁸ For this he was rebuked a few years later by the author of the huge *Geschichte der Germanenforschung*, who wrote that the word "scheinbar" before "nicht besonders erfreulich" would have given the required sense.²⁹ Others too challenged Norden; his book had become a political football. It seems surprising, to one observer at least at a distance of some sixty years, that an eminent professor at Berlin should be exposed to the scorn of many of his peers, nay inferiors, scorn of a violence that even accustomed *odium philologicum* rarely mustered. It was explicable only by the political overtones which were involved. Those who clung to the concept of *Deutschtum* could not accept any cheapening of the coin which represented it.

In 1934 Norden published his second book on the ancient Germans, entitled *Alt-Germanien*,³⁰ which drew much more upon archaeology and anthropology than the earlier volume had done. It elicited even more violent

²⁷ P. xiii.

²⁸ 56-57; quotation at the beginning.

²⁹ T. Bieder (Leipzig and Berlin 1925) III 211.

³⁰ *Alt-Germanien. Völker- und Namensgeschichtliche Untersuchungen* (Leipzig 1934; reissued Darmstadt 1962).

objections because of his treatment of the origin of the name *Germani*, the theme of the second chapter of the *Germania*.³¹

This scholarly approach to problems of an ancient text remained, or became, unacceptable to many. The new enthusiasm of the National Socialist era led some to pronouncements that read like bulletins from the Ministry of Propaganda. I offer brief excerpts from two such articles, from the years 1934 and 1936.

We believe that Tacitus is correct when he speaks of the individuality of Germany within the boundaries of the West. We believe in the autochthony of the German race which he supports in three different ways and, at the end, anthropologically. We believe with him in this native origin as in the race itself with all the anthropological characteristics which he assigns to it.

As has been said: it is not only the astonishing range of accurate details, not only the minimal number of gaps, but above all the extraordinarily true and proper tone and spirit which gain for this little book its unrivaled worth. . . . It has often enough in the past served a noble politization of our spirit. May it continue to fulfill this purpose.³²

Tacitus' assertions, which Norden claims are general characteristics used to describe the Germans, do indeed fit the Germans, as we can for the most part prove; this would be at least a strange coincidence, if we were actually just dealing with standard themes.³³

As everyone is aware, the philosophic *mélange* of Nazi thought and propaganda made a great deal of the purity, uniqueness, and superiority of the German people. Tacitus' statement was exploited to the fullest:

I personally incline to the views of those who think that the peoples of Germany have not been polluted by any marriages with other tribes and

³¹ For brief summary see 300–02.

³² H. Naumann, "Die Glaubwürdigkeit des Tacitus," *Bonner Jahrbücher* 139 (1934) 21–33:

Wir glauben, dass Tacitus recht hat mit der Eigenständigkeit Germaniens in den von ihm gezeichneten Räumen des Abendlandes. Wir glauben an die Eingeborenheit der germanischen Rasse in dem kleineren Ostseeraum, die er auf dreifache Weise und zuletzt anthropologisch begründet. Wir glauben mit ihm an diese Eingeborenheit wie an die Rasse selbst mit all den anthropologischen Merkmalen, die er ihr zuschreibt. (27)

Wie gesagt: es ist nicht nur die überraschende Fülle der richtigen Einzelheiten, nicht nur die Geringfügigkeit der Lücken, sondern vor allem der so ausserordentlich wahre und richtige Ton und Geist der diesem Büchlein seinen unvergleichlichen Wert verleiht. . . . Einer edlen Politisierung unseres Geistes hat das Büchlein schon öfters gedient. Diesen Dienst möge es ruhig weiterfüllen. (27)

³³ F. Pfister, "Tacitus und die Germanen," *Würzburger Studien zur Altertumswissenschaft* 9 (1936) 59–93:

Denn die Angaben des Tacitus, die Norden als sekundär auf die Germanen übertragen anspricht, passen doch auf die Germanen wie wir meist noch nachweisen können; das wäre aber zum mindesten ein merkwürdiger Zufall, wenn es sich wirklich nur um 'Wandermotive' handelte. (74)

that they have existed as a particular people, pure and only like themselves.³⁴

This sentence stands as the basis of the anthropology of the German people, German nationality, and German nationhood. Hegel exploited it for his theory of organicism, which states that a nation is properly understood as an organic unity, like a human body, but of greater import, having many separate organs that contribute to the general welfare. It has a larger interest, or general will, that is necessarily superior to the interest or will of any particular member or members. Under extreme conditions, the state has a super reality. Nothing may then obstruct it from liquidating those elements within it that interfere with the achievement of its objectives. The will of the state is generally identified with the will of its leader, whose character and physical person represent the essence of the nation. There is here at least a glance at the Tacitean chapters on the great chieftains and their followers, the *princeps* and the *comitatus*, the *Führer* and the *Gefolgschaft*,³⁵ whose concepts and expressions suited the needs of the present so well.

Linked with Tacitus' views of the Germans' racial purity is his military philosophy. Racial purity and military strength go hand in hand. In this virtuosity lies the basis of German military power; as he writes in chapter 33 of the *Germania*, "Fortune can give no greater boon than discord among our foes."

The thoughts of Tacitus on race and militarism were synthesized and updated in the writings of the three major ideologues of the German fascist movement, Houston Stewart Chamberlain, Alfred Rosenberg, and Adolf Hitler. Their arguments need not be detailed; they are known to all by their consequences.

We have thus come full circle to some of the major points made by the historian in the *Germania*. The essay was enormously popular from the time of the Franco-Prussian War to the period of Nazism because it offered a paradigm of belief and action. It stressed the importance of the concept of racial purity, and Tacitus' testimony was at the foundation of "il delirio megalomane tedesco," to borrow a choice phrase of an Italian scholar.³⁶ The old myths and models of the *Germania* served so well because they were read for ideological and propagandistic purposes. Something like that may have been among Tacitus' purposes when he wrote; the result some eighteen and a half centuries later would have astonished, nay, repelled him, I think, for he would have seen a people who indeed "make a solitude and call it peace"³⁷ and who, unlike the Romans,³⁸ offered no advantage and no hope to those

³⁴ *Germania* 4.

³⁵ *Germania* 7, 11-14.

³⁶ L. Canfora, *La Germania di Tacito da Engels al nazismo* (Napoli 1979) 48.

³⁷ *Agricola* 30. 4: *ubi solitudinem faciunt, pacem appellant.*

³⁸ For the clearest statement of the good that Rome's dominion brings to her subjects, see Tacitus, *Historiae* 4. 73-74.

who were trampled in the path of a mightier people who believed that they had been chosen to rule the world.³⁹

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³⁹ Two articles, which appeared subsequent to the writing of the above paper, deserve mention here: V. Losemann, "Aspekte der nationalsozialistischen Germanenideologie," in *Alte Geschichte und Wissenschaftsgeschichte: Festschrift Karl Christ zum 65. Geburtstag*, Hrsg. P. Kneissl und V. Losemann (Darmstadt 1988) 256–84, and U. Muhlack, "Die Germania im deutschen Nationalbewusstsein vor dem 19. Jahrhundert," in *Beiträge zum Verständnis der Germania des Tacitus*, Teil I, Hrsg. H. Jankuhn und D. Timpe (Göttingen 1989) 128–54.

