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An Analysis of the Literary Purpose of Tacitus' *Germania*

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My Interest in this Topic

I originally became interested in the relationship between Rome and Germany when I studied

abroad in Germany in Fall 2017 and visited an exhibit on the Roman history of the city of

Regensburg. After reading more about the history of ancient Roman imperialism in Germany and

the political mobilization of Roman history throughout German history, I was incredibly

intrigued and wanted to further explore the connection between Rome and Germany. Originally,

I thought of focusing my thesis on the Roman history of Trier (a city in southwest Germany with

a very high density of extant Roman ruins), but then chose to investigate this topic through my

German Capstone and instead center my Classics thesis on the *Germania*, as I was interested in

the divergent interpretations and complex history of the book's reception. I initially read *A Most

Dangerous Book*, by Christopher Krebs, which focuses on the Nazi use of the text and planned to

use my thesis to examine some aspect of the modern reception of the *Germania*, but as I began to

explore the text itself, I became increasingly interested in Tacitus' rhetorical strategies and subtle

political messages and decided to focus on these aspects of the text. I really enjoyed carefully

reading and thinking about Tacitus' incredibly concise, intentional, and thoughtful prose.

Abstract

My thesis offers an interpretation of the literary purpose of the *Germania* informed by close analysis of the text and consideration of the literary and historical context of the document. I first contend that Tacitus positions the Germani as a foil to the Roman people and intentionally portrays the Germani as morally pure but primitive in order to comment on moral decay in Rome while simultaneously affirming the superior cultural sophistication of Roman society. In the subsequent section of the paper, I focus on the geographic backdrop of the ethnography and argue that Tacitus constructs the landscape in a manner that subverts Domitian's claim of victory against the Chatti. I assert that while Tacitus seeks counter the Domitiantic narrative of Germanic conquest, by self-consciously inventing, rather than simply describing, the land and the people and by establishing himself as an authority on the region, he literarily colonizes Germania himself.

An Analysis of Literary Purpose of Tacitus' *Germania*

Tacitus' *Germania* is perhaps most famous in the modern era for its influence on the development of German ethnic identity. However, since the rediscovery of the text in 1425, questions regarding Tacitus' original purpose in writing this geographically-tinged ethnography have puzzled readers. Two distinct sections make up the work: (1) a monograph (*Germania* 1-27)[1] that treats the Germanic people as a singular entity and outlines aspects of their culture and temperament and (2) a descriptive itinerary of the tribes of Germania (26-46). There is a high degree of consensus amongst those presently working on the text that Tacitus positions German society as a foil to that of Rome to comment on moral decline in Rome.[2] However, most modern scholars also acknowledge that certain aspects of *Germania*, such as primitive depictions of Germanic culture and extensive focus on the hostility of the physical landscape of the region, seem incongruous with this theory of literary purpose.[3] Current academic interpretations offer a variety of explanations for this textual discordance. Some scholarship asserts that Tacitus fabricates the reflective connection between Rome and Germania in a more nuanced manner than previous analysis had recognized.[4] Other scholars argue that these inconsistencies indicate the existence of a secondary objective of the text.[5]

This paper attempts to synthesize, reconcile, and expand upon these perspectives. I argue that in depicting the Germani, Tacitus participates in the established tradition of reflective ethnography by explicitly constructing a romanized and artificially primitive Germanic identity which he uses as a rhetorical device to critique the decay of Roman social morals while

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[1] all following citations refer to the *Germania* unless otherwise noted
[2] Thomas 2009 and Rives 2012
[3] Rives 2012, 51-55
[4] O'Gorman 2012, Rives 1999, and Shumate 2012, 482
[5] Tan 2014, Krebs 2011a, Krebs 2011b

simultaneously highlighting the cultural sophistication of Rome. Tacitus adds a second political message to this otherwise prototypical ethnographic social commentary by literarily inventing a subversive geographic backdrop which minimizes Domitian's conquest of Germania. Furthermore, by obviously fabricating and defining social and geographic features of the Germanic provinces in a manner that is evocative of colonization, Tacitus achieves what he implies Domitian could not accomplish: Roman control over Germania.

I: Historical Context: Rome's Engagement with Germania

With the exception of a succinct list of Roman campaigns in the region (37.2-6), Tacitus refrains from explicitly discussing military conflicts between Rome and Germania. However, understanding the history of Roman involvement in Germania is essential to fully comprehend and analyze the text. The narratives of such campaigns would have been the primary mechanism through which most Romans, including Tacitus, encountered Germania and its inhabitants. Tacitus acknowledges this framework in the first chapter of the *Germania* by referring to the Germanic people as "tribes and kingdoms, which war revealed" (*gentibus ac regibus, quos bellum aperuit*, 1.1).

The first highly documented military dispute between the Romans and the Germanic tribes took place from 113–101 BC. This conflict, commonly referred to as the Cimbrian war, occurred when the Cimbri, a tribe originally residing north of the Danube, ventured south and encountered the Taurisci, a tribe allied with Rome. In the *Germania*, Tacitus uses this confrontation to introduce his summary of the history of military interaction between Rome and Germania, writing, "our city was in the 640th year when the armies of the Cimbri were first heard of" (*sescentesimum et quadragesimum annum urbs nostra agebat, cum primum*

Cimbrorum audita sunt arma, 37.2). In the time separating the Cimbrian war and the period of

Tacitus' literary activity, there were a number of other conflicts between Rome and the

Germanic people.[6] Though there are differences in the details of the various military

engagements, most Roman historians, including Tacitus, assert that the Germani consistently

proved themselves formidable opponents. Tacitus even acknowledges the difficulty Germanicus

faced in combat against the Germani (37.5), particularly striking since Tacitus revered

Germanicus especially as a military commander.[7] Tacitus also alludes to more contemporary

Roman military engagement with Germania, remarking, "in nearer times triumphs are greater

than victories" (*proximis temporibus triumphati magis quam victi sunt*, 37.6). Based upon

historical context, Tacitus almost certainly intended this statement to devalue Domitian's AD 82

campaign against the Chatti. As victories typically preceded triumphs, the statement is subtle but

biting; however, the intentional vagueness is also striking and likely motivated by Tacitus' desire

to undermine Domitian's claims of military success. (Tacitus' minimization of Domitian's

Germanic conquest through this work is a theme I will discuss in detail in Section IV).

II: Literary Context: Earlier Roman Works on Germania and Tacitus' Sources

Examination of the sources of information Tacitus presents in the *Germania* is a necessary

preface to rhetorical analysis of the text, because the manner in which Tacitus uses information

conveyed by other authors lends insight into his literary purpose. Though some early evaluations

of the *Germania* posit that Tacitus primarily used first-hand knowledge acquired through

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[6] Battle of Vosges 58 BC, Battle of the Sabis 57 BC, Lollian Disaster 16 BC, Battle of Arbalo 11 BC, Battle of the Lupia River 11 BC, Battle of the Teutoburg Forest AD 9, Campaign against the Marsi AD 14, Campaign against the Chatti AD 15, Campaign against the Bructeri AD 15, Battle at Pontes Longi AD 15, Battle of Idistaviso AD 16, Battle of the Angrivarian Wall AD 16, Campaign against the Chatti AD 16, Battle of Baduhenna Wood AD 28, Batavian Revolt AD 69-70, Domitian's Campaign against the Chatti AD 82

[7] Williams 2009, 121

military travel to inform his writing, most modern scholars dismiss this assertion, arguing instead that Tacitus relied upon a wide array of historical and geographic sources as reference material.[8] Several of the authors from whom Tacitus appears to have garnered information include: Julius Caesar, Pliny the Elder, Posidonius, Strabo, Seneca the Younger, Pomponius Mela, and Ptolemy.[9] Pliny the Younger's *Epistula 65* seems to imply that Tacitus depended especially upon the now lost history by Pliny the Elder, *Bella Germaniae*.[10]

Tacitus explicitly cites and textually alludes to Julius Caesar's *de Bello Gallico;* Caesar is, in fact, the only author to whom Tacitus directly refers in the *Germania* (28.1). Tacitus borrows stylistically from Caesar's work, especially in the first line of the text, where *Germania omnis* parallels Caesar's opening words of *Gallia omnis*. Christopher Krebs sees Tacitus' obvious reference to Caesar as fundamental in creating an intentionally imagined Roman identity. In his analysis of Tacitus' use of Caesar, he asserts: "in addressing the work of the Roman general—150 years old and outdated but of continuing relevance for the Roman perception of the north—Tacitus reveals an aspect of Borealism."[11] Krebs coins this term to refer to a phenomenon akin to Edward Said's theory of Orientalism in reference to fetishization of culture of people of the north as barbaric and exotic.[12] In *de Bello Gallico*, Caesar characterizes the Germani as unconquerable and hawkish.[13] Through Caesarian allusions, Tacitus connects his portrayal of the Germani with Caesar's depiction of them as fierce savages in *de Bello Gallico*.

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[8] Summarized by Potter 2012 and Anderson 2001 (1938)

[9] Discussed by Anderson 2001 (1938), xix-xxvi

[10] Anderson 2001 (1938), xix-xxvi

[11] Krebs 2011b, 202

[12] Said 1979

[13] Krebs 2011b, 203. Caesar's portrayal of the Germani as fierce savages contrasts strongly with his corresponding depiction of the Galli in *de Bello Gallico*. This literary choice is not surprising as Caesar conquered the Galli but did not have military success in fighting against the Germani.

In this way, Tacitus imbues the Germani with primitivistic characteristics which enhances their utility as a rhetorical foil to the Romans (discussed in the section below).

III: Constructed Germanic Identity: Germania as a Foil to Rome

As Krebs suggests in the statement above, Tacitus, at least to some extent, disregards factual accuracy in his depiction of the Germani. Instead, throughout both the primary monograph and the subsequent descriptions of various tribes, he creates a romanized and primitivized Germanic identity which he employs to comment on moral decay in Rome, while reminding his audience of Rome's exceptional cultural and societal sophistication.

The Herodotean Tradition of Identity-Creation in Reflective Ethnography

In inventing an artificially primitive version of a foreign people to comment on perceived domestic problems, Tacitus evokes the longstanding literary tradition of using the ethnography of an external other (especially of barbaric border tribes) as a foil to make political statements and moral judgements about one's own society. Though Hecataeus of Miletus is thought to have pioneered ethnography as a genre, Herodotus' depiction of the Scythians in his *Histories* is generally regarded as the first literary instance of this type of political and ethical reflection.[14] In both Greek and later Roman morally-reflective ethnographies, many authors employ primitivism, the idealization of those who live in a simple and uncivilized fashion, in describing a foreign society. James B. Rives argues that this rhetorical choice is particularly common because even though most Greco-Roman authors "greatly admired the sort of urban civilization that characterized their own culture, they were also somewhat ambivalent: too much of a good thing,

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[14] Rives 1999, 12; Hartog 1988, xvii

they felt, would make people soft and degenerate."[15] Furthermore, by providing a primitive

representation of the people on whom they were commenting, ethnographic authors created

temporal distance between their own societies and their literary subjects, constructing space for

critical self-reflection.

Various aspects of the content and language of the *Germania* implicitly reference the

Herodotean tradition of reflective ethnography. One particularly clear allusion occurs in 10.1-3,

in which Tacitus discusses a supposed Germanic religious ritual:

> *sortium consuetudo simplex. virgam frugiferae arbori decisam in surculos*
> *amputant eosque notis quibusdam discretos super candidam vestem temere ac*
> *fortuito spargunt. mox, si publice consultetur, sacerdos civitatis, sin privatim, ipse*
> *pater familiae, precatus deos caelumque suspiciens ter singulos tollit, sublatos*
> *secundum impressam ante notam interpretatur.*

> The practice of drawing lots is simple. From a fruit-bearing tree, they cut and
> remove a branch and cut it into twigs; and they scatter the twigs, having been
> marked with certain notations, randomly and by chance over a white cloth. If it is
> inquired publicly, a civil priest, and if privately, the father of the family himself,
> sends up three singular prayers to the sky and the gods. Following this he
> interprets the twigs with respect to the earlier impressed mark.

Tacitus likely includes a depiction of this specific ritual not for factual value, but rather as an

homage to *The Histories*, in which Herodotus asserts that the Scythians participated in a similar

ceremony.[16][17]

Tacitus' rhetorical use of grammar throughout the text is also worth noting. In the

Germania, Tacitus at points eschews conventional Latin use of the ablative, instead opting for

irregular use of the dative, evoking Greek phrasing.[18] Tacitus also repeatedly uses the verb *gigno*

in the text,[19] which appears far less frequently in Latin literature than its cognate and root,

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[15] Rives 1999, 16
[16] Brooks 1897, endnote 68
[17] C.f. Herodotus, *Histories* 4.67
[18] 4.1 *opinioni* and 11.4 *turbae*
[19] 5.3, 17.2, 45.5

gignomai, occurs in Greek texts. Though subtle, these grammatical Grecisms may serve as allusions to Herodotus and the Greek origin of reflective ethnography. By including the aforementioned content and making these grammatical choices, Tacitus demonstrates his intentional participation in the Herodotean tradition, signaling to his audience that the text is intended as a reflective commentary on Rome.

Many authors in late republican and early imperial Rome followed in the Herodotean ethnographic tradition of including ethnography as an excursus in a broader historical work [20] In this regard, Tacitus' *Germania* is somewhat unique. Rives explains further:

> where ethnographical description normally functions as a digression within historical writing, in the *Germania* it is the other way around – the historical is a digression from the ethnographical. Tacitus leaves it until chapter 37 to situate Germania and the Germani within Rome's own historical context.[21]

By publishing this ethnography as an independent text rather than as an aside in a large historical work, Tacitus clarifies his intended moral and political messages.

Romanization and Primitivism in Tacitus' Depiction of the Germani

Throughout the *Germania*, Tacitus creates a romanized Germanic identity to make his underlying moral critique and political message more accessible to his audience. He simultaneously imbues the identity he creates with primitivistic qualities to further this rhetorical purpose while still asserting Roman society's superior level of sophistication.

Chronologically, one of the first passages that demonstrates Tacitus' romanization of the Germani occurs in his discussion of their supposed use of oral tradition to record history and transmit their origin story. He writes: "With ancient songs, which is the one form among them of

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[20] e.g. Pomponius Mela and Pliny the Elder
[21] Rives 1999, 63

memory and of annals, they celebrate Tuisto, a god brought forth from the earth and his son

Mannus, as the origin of their people" (*celebrant carminibus antiquis, quod unum apud illos*

memoriae et annalium genus est, Tuistonem deum terra editum, ei filium Mannum, originem

gentis ... 2.3). Claiming a Germanic tradition of oral history in celebration of a divine origin

"forms part of the representation of Germans as early Romans,"[22] as it reflects narratives popular

in imperial Rome about the beliefs and culture of the early Romans. Many works of imperial and

republican authors demonstrate this perception. Referencing Cato the Elder's *Origines*, Cicero

alludes to the importance of song and oral tradition among the ancestral Romans in *Brutus*.

Lamenting the loss of this type of oral history, he states: "and would that those songs still

existed, which, in many times before our age, were sung at feasts by guests in turn in praise of

celebrated men" (*atque utinam exstarent illa carmina, quae multis saeclis ante suam aetatem in*

epulis esse cantitata a singulis convivis de clarorum virorum laudibus, 75.2). Other authors from

the period seem not to have perceived this use of song as universal amongst early societies, but

rather a somewhat unique defining feature of the primitive Romans. For example, Livy asserts

that the Etruscans performed plays and transmitted stories "without any song" (*sine carmine ullo*

7.2.4).[23]

Thus, by emphasizing the importance of sung history among the Germani, Tacitus places

them in cultural proximity with the early Romans. Ellen O'Gorman explains the impact of this

connection, asserting "the portrayal of Germany as similar to primitive Rome serves to align

contemporary Rome with the east, which is represented as a foreign land more comprehensible

and familiar to the Roman."[24] By establishing this parallel, Tacitus frames Rome's moral decay

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[22] O'Gorman 2012, 107 (footnote 35)
[23] Habinek 2005, 107
[24] O'Gorman 2012, 113

as a form of outside eastern decadence and thus as a divergence from a path of moral righteousness rather than as an inherently problematic characteristic of Roman society.

Later in the text, Tacitus equates certain Germanic practices with established Roman customs, stating: "these [arms] among them [are the same as our] toga of manhood, the first honor of the youth; before, they are regarded as part of the household, after as part of the state" (*haec apud illos toga, hic primus iuventae honos; ante hoc domus pars videntur, mox rei publicae,* 13.2). By comparing this Germanic rite of passage of the bestowal of arms young men to an analogous Roman ritual, Tacitus makes the culturally-distant Germanic people more relatable to his Roman audience, creating a mindset conducive to societal self-reflection.[25] Through this comparison, Tacitus also implies that the Germani are less "civilized" than the Romans, as the Roman coming-of-age custom he describes indicates a higher degree of social and cultural refinement than that of the Germani. Through establishing the Germani as romanticized exemplars of bellicosity, Tacitus achieves two seemingly contradictory aims: (1) commenting on the excessively soft disposition of the Romans by using the comparatively brutish Germani as a foil, and (2) implicitly asserting the superior cultural sophistication of Rome.

This Germanic rite of passage is described in a rhetorically similar manner by other Roman authors, including Seneca the Younger. In *Epistula 36*, written about 30 to 35 years before the *Germania*, Seneca discusses a Roman youth, stating: "If the boy [had been born] in Germania, he would be shaking the javelin, if he had been born in the time of our ancestors, he would have have learned to ride horses and to beat an enemy, hand-to-hand" (*si in Germania, protinus puer tenerum hastile vibraret; si avorum nostrorum temporibus fuisset, equitare et*

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[25] Brooks 1897, endnote 86

hostem comminus percutere didicisset, 36.8). By emphasizing the ruggedness and exemplary

boldness of these imagined individuals, Seneca frames his hypothetical German and early

Roman in a way that resembles Tacitus' constructions of these same ethnic identities. This

parallel may lend insight into why Tacitus chose to write an extended ethnography specifically

about the Germani, instead of about another foreign people. Seneca's statement demonstrates

that, even prior to the circulation of Tacitus' treatise, some Romans conceived of the Germani as

exemplars of virility and military strength.[26] From a historical perspective as well, the Germani

are one of the few people with repeated military success against Rome and with whom Rome

was repeatedly engaged in military conflict. Thus, it can be inferred that Tacitus was building

upon a preexisting stereotype in inventing a Germanic identity, further increasing the relatability

of the Germanic people to his Roman readers.

Germanic Identity, the Moral Decay, and Cultural Sophistication of Rome

Tacitus' Germani are characterized by a simplistic sense of honor that serves to further the same

two rhetorical objectives as the rite-of-passage described in 13.2. These qualities are especially

apparent in the Germanic cultural norms Tacitus chronicles in the last two chapters of the

monograph-section.

In the first line of 26, Tacitus discusses the supposed financial customs of the Germani.

He explains "to drive forward profit or to extend it into usury is unknown. In this way, it is better

protected against than if it were prohibited" (*faenus agitare et in usuras extendere ignotum;*

ideoque magis servatur quam si vetitum esset, 26.1). Tacitus' diction and syntax above make it

especially clear that he intends to critique immoral financial practices in Rome through this

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[26] Ker 2012 and Krebs 2011b both discuss the connections between the writings of Tacitus and Seneca. Krebs 2011b
discusses this within the context of the two authors' conceptions of the Germani

passage. He chooses to use the word *ignotum* (unknown) to characterize the Germanic attitude towards usury, implying that amongst his Roman readers, this practice is known. This interpretation is further substantiated by comparing these remarks to Tacitus' more direct description of the problem of usury in Rome in *Annals* 6.16:

> Indeed the evil of usury was old to the city and was a most repeated cause of sedition and discord and it was contained in the days of an old and less corrupt morality. First was a decree of the twelve tables that the interest rate should not exceed one-twelfth, which before was set from the pleasure of the rich; then it was reduced by a tribunal interrogation to half that amount, finally compound interest[27] was prohibited. A check by many decrees of the masses was brought to meet frauds, which though continually repressed, through strange artifices reappeared.

> *sane vetus urbi faenebre malum et seditionum discordiarumque creberrima causa eoque cohibebatur antiquis quoque et minus corruptis moribus. primo duodecim tabulis sanctum ne quis unciario faenore amplius exerceret, cum antea ex libidine locupletium agitaretur; dein rogatione tribunicia ad semuncias redactum, postremo vetita versura. multisque plebi scitis obviam itum fraudibus quae toties repressae miras per artes rursum oriebantur.*

Tacitus presents usury as an unchecked social problem in Rome. He frames usury as a fundamental "evil" (*malum*) of Roman society, which must be curbed through legal measures. This sits in stark contrast to his description of Germanic attitude towards the issue. He makes particular note of how the Twelve Tables, an early and fundamental set of laws in Rome (c. 450 BC) , attempted to control the practice of usury, but few observed these regulations. Tacitus alludes to this ineffectiveness of the laws in the Twelve Tables in 26, when, asserting that among the Germani, cultural ignorance prevents usury, he posits that such ignorance is more effective in controlling usury 'than if it were prohibited' (*quam si vetitum esset*). The connection between this statement and Tacitus' characterization of usury in the *Annals* is especially apparent in the language of the two excerpts. In both instances, he refers to regulations controlling usury with

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[27] Though an atypical usage, *versura* has been taken to mean compound interest in many other translations, given its context

the verb *vetare* (*vetitum* in the *Germania* and *vetita* in the *Annals*). Though it is possible that this similarity occurs by chance, given that Tacitus would have had access to the Tweleve Tables (imperfectly preserved today), in these statements he could also be referring directly to the language of the laws. As the Twelve Tables would have been familiar to most literate Romans, such a reference to their language in 26 would have been particularly evocative.

The use of Germanic customs as a foil to those in Rome is even more explicit in the subsequent chapter (27) of the *Germania* where Tacitus describes Germanic funeral traditions:

> There is no ostentation of funerals: it is only observed that bodies of famous men are cremated with certain types of wood. They heap a funeral pyre mound with neither vestiges nor spices...on the topic of monuments, they reject difficult and laborious honor as being to the dead.

> *funerum nulla ambitio: id solum observatur ut corpora clarorum virorum certis lignis crementur. struem rogi nec vestibus nec odoribus cumulant...monumentorum arduum et operosum honorem ut gravem defunctis aspernantur.*

The repeated use of negative language in phrases such as *nulla ambitio* (no ostentation) and *nec vestibus nec odoribus* (neither vestiges nor spices) is particularly striking. Rather than offering a clear illustration of the funeral customs of the Germani as one might expect in a supposedly expository text, Tacitus instead explains which practices are uncommon at Germanic funerals, but which presumably would be familiar to his reader. In this way, he implicitly assumes that his Roman audience is accustomed to funerals with excessive ostentation (*ambitio*) and with luxurious last rites (e.g. *vestibus* and *odoribus*).[28] The negative language in this passage makes it especially clear that Tacitus wishes to portray Roman funeral practices as more exorbitant and costly than is ideal. He presents this opinion through what he alleges is the German point of view on funeral expense, that such "difficult and laborious honor" (*arduum et operosum honorem*) is

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[28] c.f. Tacitus *Annals* 3

"heavy to the dead" (*gravem defunctis*). Throughout the *Germania*, numerous other "passages couched almost entirely in negative terms," such as 19.1-3 which discusses the degradation of sexual morals in Rome and 6.4, clarify that the *Germania* is indeed an intentional critique of Rome.[29]

In addition to further elucidating the central purpose of the text, Tacitus' descriptions of alleged Germanic perspectives on financial matters and wealth also demonstrate a patronizing tone and work to establish the Germani as "other." Though Tacitus undoubtedly portrays the Germani as morally superior to the Romans, he demonstrates through his assertions that the Germani lack a complex financial system and live simple, unluxurious lives, that they possess a lower level of social sophistication than the Romans. By focusing his critique of Rome solely on moral decay while reminding his audience of the remarkable level of cultural advancement of Rome, Tacitus softens the blow of his criticism, thus increasing the potential receptiveness of his readers.

Tacitus employs this same rhetorical technique later in the *Germania* as he discusses the collection of amber by the Aestii, a tribe living near the Baltic sea:

> They also ransack the sea, they alone out of everyone choose amber, which they themselves call *glesum*, among the shallows and on the shore itself. It is not inquired or learned by the barbarians what nature or what reason creates it; Now it even lay continually among certain rejects of the sea, until our luxury gave it name. To themselves it is in no use: it is gathered crude, it is carried home unformed, marveling, they accept the price it brings.
>
> *sed et mare scrutantur, ac soli omnium sucinum, quod ipsi glesum vocant, inter vada atque in ipso litore legunt. nec quae natura quaeve ratio gignat, ut barbaris, quaesitum compertumve; diu quin etiam inter cetera eiectamenta maris iacebat, donec luxuria nostra dedit nomen. ipsis in nullo usu: rude legitur, informe perfertur, pretiumque mirantes accipiunt.*

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[29] O'Gorman 2012, 95

Falling near the end of the ethnography, Tacitus' description of the amber-gathering Aestii, perhaps even to a greater extent than the previous sections of the text, highlights the Germani's supposed primitive nature and disregard for material wealth. His portrayal implies that the Aestii do not fully understand the purpose of their actions when gathering amber and indeed may not have the capacity to understand the purpose of this practice. By comparing Tacitus' portrait of the German amber-gatherers with Pliny the Elder's descriptions of amber-gathering peoples in *Natural History*, it becomes especially apparent that through this section Tacitus intends to criticize the excess materialism and focus on luxury goods in Rome, while still implicitly extolling the superior level of advancement of Roman society.

Though the section of *Natural History* which describes amber (37.44) does not mention the Aestii by name, and instead discusses other amber gathering societies, Pliny writes "it is certain that it [amber] is born from the northern ocean and that it is by the Germani called glesum" (*certum est gigni in insulis septentrionalis oceani et ab germanis appellari glaesum*). Given that Tacitus almost certainly had access to this text and includes in the *Germania* the same seemingly arbitrary and factually questionable detail that the German name for amber was *glesum* (an assertion that does not readily appear in other documents Tacitus is thought to have referenced), it is highly likely that Tacitus consulted this section of Pliny's *Natural History* as the source of his information on amber-gathering practices.[30]

Pliny's technical descriptions of the collection and formation of amber also appear to inform other parts of 45. However, exploration of details from the amber-focused section of the *Natural History* that Tacitus omits from his description may be more useful in understanding his literary purpose in 45. One passage from Pliny containing information Tacitus excludes reads:

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[30] O'Gorman 2012,98 notes this connection

> The story has been attached to the Po and today country women of the Transpadani wear amber, mostly in the regard of an ornament, but also as medicine; it is believed, naturally, to cure tonsils and ailments of the throat.
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> *Pado adnexa fabula est hodieque transpadanorum agrestibus feminis monilium vice sucina gestantibus, maxime decoris gratia, sed et medicinae; creditur quippe tonsillis resistere et faucium vitiis*[31]

Though the passage above discusses tribes nearer to Rome than the Aestii, Tacitus still draws from nearly all of Pliny's other descriptions of the people near the Po in other parts of section 45. Thus, his omission of any detail similar to that offered by Pliny in the passage above and portrayal of the Aestii as unaware of amber and as thoughtlessly engaged in its collection should be read as intentional divergence from his source. This difference demonstrates the deliberate characterization of the Aestii as primitive in their interaction with material wealth. Through this representation, Tacitus clearly draws upon the Rome-Germania parallel, which, at this point in the text, has already been quite well-established and understood by his reader to comment on what he perceives to be as an excessive focus on luxury in Rome.

The discrepancy between the Romans and Germani, however, is not just a divergence of customs; the implied interaction between the two ethnicities sets up a clear evaluative comparison of the intrinsic natures of the two peoples. The Romans, who enter chapter 45 as the implicit buyers of amber, see the mineral as innately valuable. The Germani, conversely, "have no use for [amber]" (*in nulla usa*) and are delightfully perplexed by the Roman desire for the material. By including these details, Tacitus seems to intend the scene to be interpreted in two seemingly contradictory ways. First, and perhaps most obviously, Tacitus drives home his critique of excess opulence in Rome by showing that the Romans, unlike the Germani and others, covet luxuries that are inherently meaningless. He asserts that amber was not recognized

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[31] *Natural History* 37.44. O'Gorman 2012, 98 (footnote 11) notes the connection of this passage to the *Germania*

as unique or valuable "until our [Roman] luxury gave it name" (*donec luxuria nostra dedit nomen*). However, in providing this description he also implies the existence of an innate level of aesthetic sophistication that makes Rome culturally superior to other societies. In this way, he frames the Aestii not just as simple in lifestyle, but also in mind, promoting Roman cultural and intellectual exceptionalism.

Though in many sections, including 45, the characterization of the Germani as socially inferior to the Romans is implicit and directly tied to more explicit critiques of Rome's moral climate, in section 15, Tacitus seems to primarily intend his description of the Germani to advance the notion of innate Roman cultural superiority. In describing the Germani he writes, "when they are not entering war, they pass not much time with hunting, but more through idleness, they are devoted to sleep and to food, those who are bravest and strongest doing nothing...they, themselves laze about" (*quotiens bella non ineunt, non multum venatibus, plus per otium transigunt, dediti somno ciboque: fortissimus quisque ac bellicosissimus nihili agens...ipse hebent,* 15.1). By depicting the Germani as exceptionally lazy in times of peace, Tacitus implies that they are without cultural and intellectual pursuits, and, to an extent, incapable of participating in such activities. Tacitus further emphasizes the inherent slothfulness of the Germani by phrasing this characterization as a negation of Caesar's similarly worded description of the Galli in *de Bello Gallico* (*multum sunt in venationibus*, 4.18)*,* a text that would have been familiar to a contemporary audience.[32] Though clearly a willful literary choice, Tacitus' decision to assert Roman cultural exceptionalism through depicting the Germani in this manner does not seem to be a unique aim of the *Germania*. Instead, it serves as a rhetorical tool

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[32] Krebs 2011b, 206

to soften the blow of his biting critique of Roman society and to make his nationalistic readers more receptive to his moral and political criticism of Rome.

IV: Minimization of Domitian's Germanic Conquest

In both *Agricola* and the *Histories*, Tacitus explicitly criticizes Domitian's tyrannical leadership style and false claims of military success. Though his critique of Domitian is considerably more subtle in the *Germania*, Tacitus consciously constructs the geographic backdrop of the ethnography to minimize Domitian's narrative of Germanic victory.

Tacitus and Domitian

Most modern historians agree that Tacitus maintained a positive relationship with Domitian during the years of his reign. Domitian appointed Tacitus praetor in AD 89, and many scholars argue that shortly before his death in AD 96, Domitian likely nominated Tacitus for the consulship. Given Tacitus' political debt to Domitian, the increasingly biting criticism of Domitian evident in much of the Tacitean corpus may initially seem perplexing.[33] Some scholars posit that under Domitian's reign of tyranny, Tacitus participated in activities with which he was deeply uncomfortable to further his own political career and later wrote scathing commentaries on the period of Domitian's rule in order to "exorcize his own guilt." [34] Though this perspective is quite plausible, it may also simply be the case that Tacitus had held a negative opinion of Domitian throughout his reign, but chose only to express dissent after the emperor's death out of fear for potential repercussions.

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[33] This criticism is most obviously apparent in *Histories*, where Tacitus provides a direct account of the time of Domitian's reign. The anti-tyrannical themes of many of Tacitus' other works, however, is frequently also read as Domitianic critique.

[34] Mellor 2012, 8

Domitian and the "False Triumph of Germania"

Domitian seems to have regarded and presented his alleged victory over the Chatti as his primary

military accomplishment and celebrated an ostentatious triumph in recognition of his Germanic

campaign.[35] Much Silver Age literature substantiates this view, as authors attempting to appeal

to Domitian for favors or patronage frequently referenced the campaign against the Chatti in

their efforts towards imperial flattery. In one of his earlier epigrams, written during Domitian's

life, Martial (9.1) imbeds such flattery into his work, characterizing Domitian's Germanic

victory as eternal:

> As long as the great light of the Kalends of Germanicus
> Might sow the name of great subdued Rhine….
> The high glory of the Flavian family shall remain
> With the sun and the stars and Roman glow
> Whatever [Domitian's] unconquered hand builds, is to the heavens
>
> *Dum grande famuli nomen adseret Rheni*
> *Germanicarum magna lux Kalendarum…*
> *Manebit altum Flaviae decus gentis*
> *Cum sole et astris cumque luce Romana.*
> *Invicta quidquid condidit manus, caeli est.*

Allusions to Domitian's campaign against the Chatti in this epigram and in other literature of the

Domitianic period demonstrate that members of the elite believed that Domitian conceived of his

alleged Germanic victory as integral to his reputation and legacy. The fact that Martial chose to

include a detail referencing Domitian's supposed victory (*famuli Rheni*) in this epigram, written

in general recognition of Domitian and the Flavian imperial line, indicates the importance of the

Germanic campaign to Domitian's narrative of military and political success. Thus, it makes

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[35] Tuck 2016, 112

sense that Tacitus chose to minimize the alleged Domitianic victory against the Chatti as a form

of political dissent.

Some modern scholars theorize that Tacitus' first two works, *Agricola* and the *Germania*,

operated programmatically to undermine Domitian's alleged military victory. Rives explains:

> Tacitus' goal in the *Agricola* was to celebrate the achievements of his father-in-law,
> which Domitian had intentionally devalued lest they overshadow his own victory in
> Germania, and then in the *Germania* to disprove Domitian's claims by describing the
> Germani as they really were.[36]

Tacitus' criticism of Domitian in *Agricola* is quite blatant and direct, perhaps as a result of his

personal desire to correct misconceptions of the military reputation and political career of

Gnaeus Julius Agricola, which Domitian had tarnished through propaganda and political

machinations. In *Agricola*, Tacitus describes Domitian's Germanic campaign as a "false triumph

of Germania" (*falsum e Germania triumphum*, A. 39.1).

Because in the *Germania*, Tacitus' more textually obvious aim of critiquing Rome's

moral decay takes center stage, his criticism of Domitian is more subtle and takes place primarily

through subversive descriptions of the geographic backdrop. However, as mentioned at the start

of this paper, Tacitus clearly references Domitian's ostentatious and highly-public triumph for

his Germanic victory, writing: "for in nearer times there are triumphs more than victories" (*nam*

proximis temporibus triumphati magis quam victi sunt. 37.6). By including this statement,

Tacitus clarifies the secondary goal of the text and pushes his audience to interpret certain

geographic sections as political commentary. Assuming such a framework elucidates the

intention of many passages that seem perplexing or incompatible with the more obvious central

aim of the text.

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[36] Rives 2012, 52

Geography as a Rhetorical Tool in the Germania

Though Tacitus imbues nearly all components of his description of the Germanic landscape with

rhetorical meaning, his use of rivers and oceans to communicate a political message is especially

notable. He opens the text with the seemingly-noninflammatory but in fact highly-charged lines:

> All Germany is separated from the Galli, the Rhaeti, and the Pannoni by the the Rhine
> and Danube rivers, from the Sarmatians and Dacians by the mutual fear and mountains:
> Ocean surrounds the rest, embracing broad bays and immense spaces of islands, with
> newly known tribes and kingdoms, which war revealed.

> *Germania omnis a Gallis Raetisque et Pannoniis Rheno et Danubio fluminibus, a*
> *Sarmatis Dacisque mutuo metu aut montibus separatur: cetera Oceanus ambit, latos*
> *sinus et insularum immensa spatia complectens, nuper cognitis quibusdam gentibus ac*
> *regibus, quos bellum aperuit.*

Though, at first glance, this description of the Germanic landscape seems an unremarkable and

appropriate prelude to the ethnography, the content and language of the excerpt allude to the

political message of the text. Tacitus' opening words "Germania omnis," as mentioned earlier,

clearly reference the introductory phrase of Caesar's *de Bello Gallico*, "Gallia omnis". This

allusion foreshadows Tacitus' intentional use of outdated official boundaries of the Roman

province of Germania as the borders Tacitus employs are those from the period of Caesar's rule

and draw the reader's mind to a time when Germania was undoubtedly beyond Roman control.

The subsequent description of the Rhine as Germania's Western boundary further establishes the

idea that Tacitus willfully ignores the official contemporary Roman borders of Germania, in an

effort to minimize Domitian's conquest of the region. Zoë Tan asserts "for Tacitus to employ the

Rhine as boundary is blatantly anachronistic given the creation of the new provinces on the west

bank....at best ungenerous to the Flavians, at worst negating their advances outright."[37]

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[37] Tan 2014, 183-184

Tacitus' choice to begin with this geographic description, in lieu of a formal prologue, is unconventional, especially for a minor work with such a singular focus. Contemporary readers accustomed to more standard introductions would likely have been surprised by the omission of a prologue and thereby would potentially have been more attuned to the subtextual political message underlying this passage and prevalent throughout the rest of the work.

Beginning with this passage, Tacitus utilizes descriptions of the hostile North Sea to further his deconstruction of the narrative of Roman control over Germania. As Germania was allegedly a "conquered" land, and thus supposedly accessible and approachable to the Romans, one might expect Tacitus' geographic descriptions to contain substantial detail, or at the very least, justifications of or explanations for instances of ignorance. However, given the discourse surrounding the North Sea in earlier and contemporary Roman literature, Tacitus' decision to employ this body of water as Germania's upper boundary has strong rhetorical implications. Pliny, Seneca, and Strabo, all of whom Tacitus would have read, characterize the North Sea as impassable and inaccessible, a force which Rome had not, and perhaps could not, conquer.[38] Thus, Tan explains that "by establishing Oceanus as a border of Germania, Tacitus distances its northern reaches, blending them with the limits of the earth....while the ocean can indeed be strange and hostile, it is just as often a foil for Roman supremacy."[39] By associating Germania with the indomitable North Sea, Tacitus subverts Domitian's alleged conquest of Germania. With this connection he implies that like the North Sea, Germania is external to Rome, and not yet within the realm of Roman control.

Tacitus' portrayal of the interior of Germania as hostile and foreign further develops a sense of the region as unknown and outside of Roman jurisdiction. In the section immediately

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[38] Romm 1994, 148
[39] Tan 2014, 186

following the introduction, Tacitus poses a rhetorical question emphasizing the inaccessibility of

Germania:

> Furthermore, who, even in light of the dangers of the horrible and unknown seas, would
> seek Germany, unformed land, having left Asia or Africa or Italy, with its difficult sky,
> and gloomy aspect and culture, if it were not one's homeland?
>
> *quis porro, praeter periculum horridi et ignoti maris, Asia aut Africa aut Italia relicta*
> *Germaniam peteret, informem terris, asperam caelo, tristem cultu aspectuque nisi si*
> *patria sit?*[40]

By characterizing Germania as *informem terris* (unshaped land), Tacitus eschews any notion of

Roman control over the region, dismissing Domitian's claims of subduing the Germani and

conquering the Germanic lands. His inclusion of this label in a rhetorical question, a form of

phrasing that heightens the attention of the reader, seems a deliberate choice intended to clue his

audience in to his political message.

    In distancing Germania from the grasp of the Roman empire, Tacitus not only tarnishes

Domitian's reputation, but also sets the stage for a future narrative of military conquest. At the

time Tacitus published the *Germania*, Trajan, who assumed the role of emperor while Tacitus

was likely in the process of drafting the text, was leading a military expedition in Germania in an

attempt to strengthen Roman control over the region.[41] Through minimizing Domitian's

conquests and understating Roman control of Germania, Tacitus, perhaps in an effort to curry

favor with the new emperor, creates a narrative that sets the scene to maximize the political

impact of any military success that Trajan may have on the Germanic frontier. Conversely, if

Trajan's military campaign were unsuccessful, by describing Germania in such a hostile manner,

Tacitus provides evidence for a potential Trajanic narrative of an "indomitable North."

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[40] 2.2

[41] Krebs 2011b, 210

Tacitus' Literary Conquest of Germania

By textually fabricating a version Germania and its inhabitants, Tacitus, in a literary sense, does

what he asserts Domitian could not: exert control over Germania. Though initially, *Germania*

may simply seem a description of a colonized region, certain aspects of the diction, tone, and

content support the notion that through the text, Tacitus literarily colonizes the Germanic

provinces. The section below highlights three particularly compelling rhetorical choices which

exemplify this function of the ethnography.

1. Naming

Tacitus extensively discusses the etymology of names of Germanic places and peoples

throughout the text. Though Tacitus does not position himself as the agent responsible for

naming, his extensive knowledge of the names and origins of names of different Germanic tribes

and geographic features firmly establishes his status as an authority on Germania and its people.

Throughout the text, Tacitus characterizes Germania as unknown, yet through naming, he

purports to have a comprehensive understanding of the region and its people. O'Gorman argues

that this paradox is evident from the beginning of the ethnography. She explains:

> an integral part of the Roman act of possessing another space is the act of naming. In this
> sense, the entire Latin text *de origine et situ Germanorum*...is an act of possession by the
> Roman writer, as he names and makes comprehensible alien places and people. The
> words nomen ('name'), vocare ('call'), vocabulum ('word') recur throughout the text,
> explicitly appropriating German acts and artefacts, and serving as a lexicon to German
> attitudes.[42]

This diction clarifies the conscious nature of the naming to the audience and contributes to the

colonizing and possessive tone of the text. This method of literary conquest is evident in Tacitus'

description of the origin of the very name "Germania." He states:

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[42] O'Gorman 2012, 105

> The word Germania was added recently and newly, since those who first crossed the Rhine and expelled the Gauls, now called the Tungri, then were called Germani: in this way the name of a tribe, and of a people, prevailed gradually, so that they were first called this invented name of Germani by the conquerors from fear and soon by them themselves.
>
> *Germaniae vocabulum recens et nuper additum, quoniam qui primi Rhenum transgressi Gallos expulerint ac nunc Tungri, tunc Germani vocati sint: ita nationis nomen, non gentis evaluisse paulatim, ut omnes primum a victore ob metum, mox etiam a se ipsis, invento nomine Germani vocarentur.*[43]

This etymological narrative does not appear in any of the sources Tacitus is thought to have consulted and is almost certainly incorrect, however he still presents it as indisputable fact. Tacitus takes this type of gratuitous literary license in descriptions of naming throughout the text and repeatedly portrays material he presumably knew to be inaccurate or unverified as objectively true. The instance above, and other passages in which Tacitus invents etymologies, are particularly significant given the importance placed on naming as an act of possession and control within Roman culture.[44] Through naming, Tacitus implicitly asserts dominion over Germania, something which he argues the historical Roman conquerors, and particularly Domitian, lacked.[45] In this way, 2.3 and other passages which discuss the origins of Germanic names perpetuate Tacitus' assertion of literary control over the region.

2. Germanic Religion and *Interpretatio Romana*

Though Tacitus describes Germania as external to and largely unconquered by Rome, his characterization of Germanic culture and his comparisons of Germanic rituals to Roman practices seem to subtextually establish some degree of Roman authority over the region. This method of literary conquest underlies much of the text and is especially apparent in sections that

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[43] 2.3

[44] E.g. discussion of spear names in 6, Boiemum 28.2, Agrippinenses 28.4. See Webster 1995, 158.

[45] 37.2-6

discuss Germanic religion. One instance of this, credited as the origin of the phrase *interpretatio romana*,[46] occurs in 43.3. In describing a particular Germanic tribe, Tacitus writes:

> Among the Nahanarivalians is exposed a grove of ancient religion. A priest dressed as a woman presides, but by Roman interpretation, they remember here the gods Castor and Pollux. To this force of divinity, the name is Alcis. No images, no vestiges of foreign superstition are worshipped; however, brothers and young men are worshipped.
>
> *Apud Nahanarvalos antiquae religionis lucus ostenditur. Praesidet sacerdos muliebri ornatu, sed deos interpretatione Romana Castorem Pollucemque memorant. Ea vis numini, nomen Alcis. Nulla simulacra, nullum peregrinae superstitionis vestigium; ut fratres tamen, ut iuvenes venerantur.*

Tacitus' diction in the passage above evokes typical Roman imperialist discourse, as comparing provincial gods to Roman counterparts was "widespread and long established" in discussion of the cultures of colonized peoples.[47] Jane Webster further explains the colonizing nature of this practice, stating:

> Foreign gods were not simply viewed in terms of the Roman pantheon - they were converted to it by force...Interpretatio... is hopelessly one-sided: less a dialogue between Roman and native than an imperialist monologue.[48]

Tacitus provides a similar framework for his earlier discussion of certain Germanic religious beliefs which he purports to be common to all tribes, asserting:

> Of all the gods, they most greatly worship Mercury, to whom on certain days they deem it right to sacrifice with human victims. They please Hercules and Mars with lawful offerings...Moreover they do not regard it in accord with the magnitude of the celestiality to confine the gods within walls nor to represent them in human countenance: they consecrate woods and groves and by the names of the gods they call these seclusions, which they see only in reverence.
>
> *Deorum maxime Mercurium colunt, cui certis diebus humanis quoque hostiis litare fas habent. Herculem et Martem concessis animalibus placant...Ceterum nec cohibere parietibus deos neque in ullam humani oris speciem adsimulare ex magnitudine*

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[46] The phrase *interpretatio romana* is frequently used by modern scholars to broadly discuss Roman interpretation of foreign religions through the context of Roman religious figures and ideas

[47] Rives 2012, 307

[48] Webster 1995, 160-161

caelestium arbitrantur: lucos ac nemora consecrant deorumque nominibus appellant secretum illud, quod sola reverentia vident.[49]

By directly attributing the names of Roman gods to Germanic deities without distinguishing between the theologies of the two cultures, Tacitus assumes an even more blatantly colonizing tone. Though contemporary authors often adopted an imperialist approach towards cultures which they deemed to be foreign and less refined, this type of comparative religious discourse appears to have been reserved for discussion of cultures and places that had already been colonized.[50] Through discussing Germania and its people with language commonly used to refer to aspects of a colonized province while simultaneously asserting that all claims of Roman conquest of Germania were false, Tacitus seems to position himself as the literary conqueror of the region. Superimposing the contemporary model of Roman theology onto the Germanic religion also contributes to Tacitus' construction of the Germani as akin to primitive Romans; though the essence of the Germanic religion is the same and that of Rome, the beliefs and practices of the Germani are both more pure and less sophisticated than those of the Romans (see section III).

3. Tribal Itineraries

Throughout the second half of the *Germania*, Tacitus establishes control over the region by offering a hodological presentation of various Germanic tribes. Tan explains that Tacitus treats the tribes of Germania "as 'destinations', features of the environment...One people is placed in relation to the next by the use of terms such as *ultra*, *proximi*, *iuxta*, *tergo*, *fronte*, *in latere*, *cotermina*, *deinde*, *retro* or *trans*."[51] By discussing the Germanic tribes as destinations, Tacitus

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[49] 9.1
[50] Webster 1995, 153
[51] Tan 2014, 195

objectifies the people of Germania, using them as tools to structure his writing. Through

reducing entire societies to orienting aspects of the environment, Tacitus implicitly assumes

Roman control and superiority over the tribes, establishing an imperialist power dynamic

between the Romans and the Germans.

By utilizing "travel-inspired sequencing"[52] while simultaneously denying his audience a

comprehensive technical description of the Germanic landscape, Tacitus paradoxically positions

himself as both an explorer and conqueror of an uncolonized land and as an authority on the

region in possession of extensive knowledge of its people. Throughout both parts of the

ethnography, Tacitus presents Germania as external and inaccessible to Rome. Tan highlights a

particularly poignant example of this, arguing that "the *Germania*...insists on the absence of any

form of urbanism, in spite of its own reliance on structural principles that necessitate the

description of discrete points in a landscape."[53] While Tacitus asserts that Germania lacks

"civilization" and is distinctly outside the realm of the Roman empire, he possesses a wealth of

information on the space and acts as a tour guide for his readers. In this way, Tacitus uses travel-

themed discourse to imbue the land with two seemingly contradictory characteristics. On the

surface, he describes Germania as having eluded Roman domination; subtextually however, his

command of the history of the area and corresponding ability to make Germania accessible to his

audience seems to establish a subtle Roman authority over the region.

V: Conclusion

Modern scholars often regard the *Germania*, and especially the aspects of the text that subvert

Domitian's narrative of successful conquest of the region as rehearsal for the *Histories* and the

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[52] Tan 2014, 195.
[53] Ibid.

Annales, and typically consider it an early component of Tacitus' programmatic literary condemnation of Domitian and authoritarian tyranny. However, Tacitus' portrayal of the Germania presents a self-contained and rhetorically complex critique of moral decay in Rome and has had impacts far beyond what he could reasonably have imagined. Tacitus' portrait of the Germania influenced not only contemporary opinions about social morality in Rome, but, after the text was rediscovered in 1425, contributed to dialogue surrounding German ethnic identity during the German humanist movement, German unification campaign, and Nazi era. The subtlety of the text makes it difficult to discern the true literary purpose of the work, and as a result, audiences have interpreted the *Germania* in unusual and surprising ways throughout history. Though there will almost certainly never be a definitive understanding of Tacitus' literary motive; my interpretation above utilizes the literary and historical context of the document to offer one possible theory of intent. Given that Tacitus seems to have intended the text as social commentary on moral breakdown in Rome and as indirect political critique of Domitian, rather than as a factually accurate account of the Germani and their customs, the role of the *Germania* in informing later narratives of Germanic identity is all the more perplexing and perhaps even problematic.

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