

## **Quid Tacitus . . . ? The *Germania* and the Study of Anglo-Saxon England**

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The construction of the Germanic *comitatus* by Cornelius Tacitus in one of his early works, the *Germania*, offers scholars of Anglo-Saxon England an easy shorthand way to discuss the heroic code as it appears in an assortment of late Old English texts, notably including *Beowulf* and the *Battle of Maldon*. This convenient shorthand has been much used, beginning in the nineteenth century with such scholars of history as John Richard Green and John Mitchell Kemble, and largely continuing in a straight line — although with some changes in emphasis and occasional concerns about relevance — to the present day. This dependence, or at the very least this call to a Roman history to provide a sense of longitude and certainty to the construction of Anglo-Saxon heroic behaviour, offers scholars a kind of chronological certainty in their consideration of the Germanic tribes and their behaviours when they first migrated to England. Tacitus could demonstrate the fixed and longstanding construction of heroism and of the cultural mores of Germanic society. The *Germania* could function as a touchstone text, a way to indicate the longevity of the notion of a fiercely individual, frequently violent, and fiercely loyal tribesman serving a chosen lord. To some extent, this use of Tacitus derives from the clarity and elegance with which the late Roman historian expressed himself, making it easy for scholars to comprehend and to quote his historiography of the Germanic tribes. However, it might also be argued that the call to Tacitus reflects a more profound desire to establish Anglo-Saxon social behaviour as part of a longstanding and rich tradition, as reflecting a personal integrity which reaches back to the Germanic tribes ranged against the Roman legions, and defeating them. Here, I will argue, first, that Tacitus wrote the *Germania* for very

specific reasons which should not be ignored when this ethnographic treatise is considered and should occasion some pause when scholars wish to consider it as a ‘true’ representation of Germanic behaviour.<sup>1</sup> Second, I will suggest that some of the ways in which Tacitus is bandied about in modern Anglo-Saxon scholarship require some modification — both because they derive from a historiographic and ethnographic approach which scholars in other fields no longer use and because they offer too simplistic an interpretation of both Tacitus and Germanic social behaviour as it came to function in Anglo-Saxon England. The argument that Tacitus still provides the best short introduction to the presentation of *lof* ‘fame’ and to the role of the *heorðgeneatas* ‘hearth-companions’ in Old English texts may have its shortcomings. I want, therefore, to look again at the late Roman context of the *Germania*, the evidence for its transmission and possible influence on Anglo-Saxon texts, and its modern history as the basic historiographic reference in the nineteenth century for how Anglo-Saxon society functioned. Moreover, there has developed in the last twenty years a bifurcation in approach, in which historians no longer seem to consider Tacitus’s *Germania* as central to their conception of Anglo-Saxon governance structures, but some literary analysts continue to produce a Tacitean master narrative for Old English heroic behaviour.<sup>2</sup> Teasing out the details of this approach to Tacitus may offer some new insight as to how — and how carefully — Anglo-Saxon scholars should use references to the *Germania* when thinking about Anglo-Saxon culture. Finally, I want to consider whether general introductions to the field should continue to use this shorthand as a way of explicating heroic behaviour. Tacitus may offer a convenient option for comparative purposes, and anchors Old English behaviour in its Germanic origins — or does he?

*Quid Tacitus* with twenty-first century thinking about Anglo-Saxon England, then? Two initial answers are possibilities, the first of which is rarely discussed as a genuine option. Writers of late Anglo-Saxon England could have had access to Tacitus, as they did to some other Roman and Greek scholars of late antiquity, so that they directly used Tacitus as an unacknowledged source for their representation of heroism. That is, Tacitus’s construction of heroism and what is often called the *comitatus* might have offered a direct textual exemplar for writers in late Anglo-Saxon England, rather than there being simply a more general piece of evidence about the origins of Anglo-Saxon heroic and kingly behaviour. Moreover, this possibility could

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1 I previously considered these issues in “Tacitus, Old English Heroic Poetry, and Ethnographic Preconceptions.”

2 I am very grateful to the two anonymous reviewers of this article, who significantly improved its approach and emphasis. I am also grateful to C. L. Murison for providing Tacitean references and editing.

suggest that the surviving Old English texts which construct what some scholars see as a particularly Tacitean view of tribal behaviour are actually literary constructs, rather than 'authentic' representations of Anglo-Saxon behaviour. Whatever this possibility might mean for thinking about the indomitable drive of the hearth-companions in the *Battle of Maldon* or the companionship Beowulf's men show him, this possibility requires some attention to the manuscript history of Tacitus's *Germania*. Alternatively, the relevant works of Tacitus as rediscovered in the Renaissance could offer a blueprint laying out exactly how similar Anglo-Saxon and Germanic heroic culture was to its ancestor in antiquity, a blueprint which validated and endorsed a particular kind of national identity. Although less direct than the possibility of Tacitus serving as a direct source, this possibility that somehow the early German tribes as represented by Tacitus bore some resemblance to the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes who migrated to England (or invaded, depending on one's view) and remained there to found and develop a nation is clearly a significant one for thinking about national identity and patterns of behaviour. Demonstrating this somewhat more vague set of links, however, requires a sense of the historiography of Anglo-Saxon England and the role of Tacitus in the early and late development of that historiography.

Tacitus wrote his explication of the Germanic tribes in 98 C.E., a time of great turmoil in Rome, after the turbulent reign of Domitian, filled with political conflicts with the senate. Domitian's assassination in 96 C.E. marked the end of the period later covered by Tacitus in his famous historical texts, the *Annals* (about the years 14-68 C.E.) and the *Histories* (concerned with 68-96 C.E.), and in the historian's personal life this was the year in which his careful planning and intelligent work as an administrator had him appointed, by Domitian, as a suffect consul — at what would appear to be the youngest possible age. Tacitus's career as a Roman administrator continued, and ended with the most prestigious of appointments — the quaestorship of Asia in the year 112. During this time, he also completed three extant short texts, almost certainly before embarking on the greater projects of his major historical works: the *Dialogus*, which discusses the decline of oratory in his day; the *Agricola*, a biography of his father-in-law; and the *Germania*.<sup>3</sup> This text, now famous beyond all expectation, is a short treatise which might today be termed an ethnography; it

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3 Some details of Tacitus's life have been gleaned from internal references in his works, but many of his letters to Pliny the Younger also survive, with whom he was a most frequent correspondent. He was clearly a well known and highly trusted administrator. The fullest analysis, interweaving the biography with the historical texts, is, of course, Syme's two-volume *Tacitus*, but see also Martin, *Tacitus*. Less helpful on Tacitus's life but offering the most up-to-date approach to his texts are the essays in Woodman, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Tacitus*.

has 46 very short chapters, for a total of fewer than 5500 words in Latin. Part I, the first 27 chapters, includes a general account of the German lands, the people, and their customs and institutions, and Part II, chapters 28 to 46, contains a serial description of the individual tribes.<sup>4</sup> The manuscript history is complicated, and there have even been suggestions that the entire text was forged. Rodney P. Robinson provides an extensive discussion of the manuscripts and the textual history of the *Germania*, offering a very detailed analysis beginning with the purported lost ninth-century copy, probably produced at Fulda, known as the Hersfeld Codex.<sup>5</sup> That this codex did exist is proven by a paraphrase of brief sections of the text by Rudolf of Fulda.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, it is possible that some pages from this codex survive in the first Renaissance copy of the text, which is also the only source for all three of Tacitus's minor works.<sup>7</sup> The modern textual history of the *Germania* begins, then, with the fifteenth-century humanist manuscript known as the Codex Aesinas, which appears to be the source of all the other *Germania* manuscripts (and very many copies were made in the Renaissance, all of which appear to be direct or indirect copies of this single manuscript).<sup>8</sup> The text of

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4 For the Latin text of the *Germania*, see Önnersfors, ed., *P. Cornelii Taciti De origine et situ Germanorum*. Benario provides two student editions: *Tacitus: 'Germany' – 'Germania'*, which succinctly notes, with reference to the afterlife of the text, that "Many in the Nazi regime admired the *Germania* as a holy text, and it became a bible of their racist philosophy" (p. 9); and an annotated translation, *Tacitus' Agricola, 'Germany' and 'Dialogue on Orators'*. Two student editions of particular elegance and clarity are Sleeman's and the Latin-German edition of Lindauer, which has an excellent bibliography.

5 See Robinson, ed., *The 'Germania' of Tacitus*, which offers the fullest interpretation of the complex manuscript history. Although Schaps, in "The Found and Lost Manuscripts of Tacitus' *Agricola*," posits a significantly different textual history for the *Agricola*, Murgia and Rodgers, in "A Tale of Two Manuscripts," reinstate Robinson's account except that they propose that the Codex Aesinas was both a copy of the Hersfeld manuscript, and incorporated some pages and openings from that ninth-century codex.

6 See Hirstein's *Tacitus' 'Germania' and Beatus Rhenanus*, which opens with a detailed study of the extant *Germania* manuscripts and of the early editions, preparatory to studying the editorial and interpretative contribution of the Alsatian scholar Rhenanus to *Germania* studies. Rhenanus argued that the first half of the *Germania* described a long-past world, a *Germania vetus*, and saw the whole as a kind of *commentarius* on the German peoples; Hirstein, *Tacitus' 'Germania' and Beatus Rhenanus*, 275.

7 The reception history of the *Germania* is an entire field of study in itself. For the most recent conspectus of the field, see Krebs, "A Dangerous Book," 280-99. The entire history of *Germanitas* and the discourses of *Germanentum* developed from the discovery of this text in the Renaissance and the first stirrings of German nationalism, and again with the fully argued discourse of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

8 Önnersfors lists eight manuscripts as important for the reception history of the *Germania*, referring throughout to Robinson, who is clearly the authority on the textual history.

the *Germania* is copied entirely by the humanist scribe Guarnieri, so that even if the argument about surviving folia from the ninth-century Hersfeld manuscript is accepted, it does not apply to the textual history of the *Germania*, and is directly relevant to discussions only of the *Agricola* and other texts from the manuscript (in one or two volumes). The provenance of the Codex Aesinas is particularly fraught, given that it was claimed by both Italian and German humanists in the Renaissance and to the present day. Possibly, the Italians wanted the text for what it demonstrated about what Roman behaviour should be, and the Germans saw it as their national text describing what they had always been. In any case, it found its way into the possession of Italian counts, who amazingly retained possession (though apparently forgetting about it in the 1950s) in the face of a determined effort by Himmler and the SS to obtain the manuscript in 1943. Simon Schama writes a powerful account of this episode in the modern history of the manuscript, which was damaged in a flood in the 1960s and finally deposited in the Biblioteca Nazionale, Rome.<sup>9</sup> Although scholarly opinion remains somewhat divided on whether there were one or two Hersfeld (or Fulda) manuscripts from which the minor works might have derived, what is clear is that for the *Germania* the originary manuscript is the fifteenth-century copy found in the Codex Aesinas.<sup>10</sup>

The *Germania* as a text follows in a long Greek and Roman tradition of ethnographical writing, including Hecataeus of Miletus, who suggested, inspired by Egypt, that the climate influenced a nation's character, and also including Herodotus and Posidonius — the first to provide an account of the Germans. Tacitus does not appear to have visited Germany himself (there is some possibility that he held a legionary command there during the four years in which his time is not fully accounted for, but there is no evidence) but seems to depend entirely on literary sources; at the end of chapter 27, the end of the first part of the *Germania*, he explicitly indicates, “Haec in commune de omnium Germanorum origine ac moribus accepimus” (§27.18-19: This is what we generally accept about the origin and customs of all the Germans) — there is no indication here, as there often is elsewhere in Tacitus, of personal knowledge. His sources for this generally accepted material are uncertain; they appear to have included the philosopher and historian Posidonius in the thirtieth book of his *Histories*, written in the early decades of the first century B.C.E. and now lost; and Julius Caesar's *Gallic Wars*, which has some firsthand information but also mostly depends

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9 See Schama, *Landscape and Memory*, 75-120. Schama frames the episode as a way into thinking about Germanic traditions of the forest.

10 For the most recent analysis, see Martin, “From Manuscript to Print,” 245-48.

on reports and Posidonius.<sup>11</sup> Tacitus does not appear to have depended heavily on Caesar, the only source mentioned by name in the *Germania*, though his opening sentences clearly imitate the earlier text — intriguingly, the geography presented there, which may have been right in Caesar’s day, was certainly wrong by the time of Tacitus. Tacitus also used Livy’s *History*, which apparently began with a description of Germany and its inhabitants, and the elder Pliny’s lost *Bella Germaniae* and its successor. Pliny may well be a particularly important source, especially since Tacitus, writing presumably in 97 or 98 C.E., does not refer to events or information, especially in the ethnography which is the first part of the text. Pliny died in the Vesuvius eruption of 79, and his works are usually dated to about 69. Standard practice in Rome, as earlier in Greece, suggests that Tacitus probably also consulted retired military men and merchants — if not for other parts, then certainly for the concluding chapters of the *Germania*, which introduce tribes not previously known to the Romans.

Tacitus took this material and shaped it. To some extent he reproduced the commonplaces of ethnography, the stereotypes about barbarian peoples, as he inherited the tradition. He added his own inimitable style specializing in brevity. He also added some interpretation, notably based on Stoic philosophy including Seneca. And he added, perhaps not intentionally though that seems unlikely, his pure and angry implicit comparison of the Germanic tribes as having a sense of heroism, a simple and clear understanding of how to live their lives and fight their battles, and a deep-seated sense of duty to their lords (whether elected or not). His Roman compatriots no longer had these attributes, and Tacitus wanted them back. His *Germania* is less about Germany than it is about Rome, and about the need to reconsider the morality and spirit of the Romans. As a historian embedded in the politics of his own time, he undoubtedly prepared the *Germania*, and its predecessor text the *Agricola* — both of them generic hybrids — to serve a purpose in his own time.

Ronald Syme, the magisterial biographer of Tacitus, notes that the *Germania* is unique but not original, and that the sources are all books, largely Pliny. Tacitus fails to avoid a number of errors caused by his use of much older sources, and Syme comments that he was “not vigilant enough” in his supplementing of this material;

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11 The sources of the *Germania* have been much canvassed. For this discussion I am particularly indebted to Wenghofer, and to Rives, whose translation includes an extended and useful discussion of the Germanic tribes, the Roman ethnographic tradition, and Roman interactions with and literary treatments of the early Germans. Rives is particularly interesting on Tacitus’s choice to write the *Germania*, its reliability, and his reasons for structuring it as an ethnographic study followed by a periegetic analysis of the Germanic tribes.

elsewhere, Syme states, “Germany or Britain, Tacitus shows little interest in it.”<sup>12</sup> Perhaps the clearest statement of the problems with the *Germania* is that of T. A. Dorey in 1969. After a judicious and careful examination of the writing style, the sources, and the purpose of the moralizing tone of the piece, Dorey concludes,

Yet in spite of the interesting nature of the theme and the skill shown in treating it, there is something that the *Germania* lacks to make it a great work of literature. There is a feeling of remoteness from the subject. Where Caesar and Herodotus, in their accounts of Britain, Gaul and Germany, of Scythia and Africa, wrote like explorers, Tacitus writes like a man of letters, clothing in attractive words the reports of others. But the most important weakness in the *Germania* is this. Tacitus is at his greatest when his feelings are touched, when his passions are roused, as they are so often in the *Agricola*, the *Histories*, and the *Annals*. But the whole subject-matter of the *Germania* is too remote from his personal experience; he is too detached from it to give of his best.<sup>13</sup>

Dorey’s conclusion, that Tacitus did not know enough about Germany and its tribes to produce a good ethnography of the area at the end of the first century C.E., is both insightful and intriguing. More intriguing yet is the general conclusion of most Tacitus scholars that his tone was almost always nostalgic, even elegiac.<sup>14</sup> Tacitus, throughout his most important works, the *Annals* and the *Histories*, focused on honourable and dishonourable conduct, always presenting the former as something that, when it occasionally occurred in the present day or the recent past, recalled the days of Roman glory in the distant past. Honour was to be expected of the Romans who built the empire; it was not common among those who were in the process of losing it. In other words, as far as Tacitus appears to have been concerned, honour

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12 Syme, *Tacitus*, 127 and 126. Syme’s discussion of Tacitus is the one to which all other considerations refer. For a more recent, and lively, general assessment, see Ash, *Tacitus*; Ash is particularly taken with the generic irregularities of the *Agricola*, Tacitus’s first work.

13 Dorey, “‘Agricola’ and ‘Germania,’” 17.

14 See, for example, Starr, who states that where others acknowledged that monarchy was inevitable, Tacitus “depicted [the imperial system] in a bitterly hostile light,” and refers elsewhere to the “bitter pen” of Tacitus; Starr, *The Roman Empire*, 46 and 98. Similarly, Balsdon describes Tacitus’s general outlook as “nostalgic; nothing was as good as it had been in the past”; Balsdon also presents Tacitus as a snob and a *parvenu*, a man with no family history, and therefore perhaps more likely to see those beyond the borders of the empire — such as the Germans — as foreigners and objects of scorn; see Balsdon, *Romans and Aliens*, 8 and 21.

was something of a historical concept.<sup>15</sup> The tone throughout is one of disillusion and anger with the present. Tacitus constructs the Germanic tribes, a distant and insufficiently understood collection of peoples, in remarkably similar terms; their sense of honour, of the duty to die with one's lord, of a code of behaviour closely resembles that of ancient Rome in Tacitus's later works and not the duplicity of his own time. The *Germania* displaces in space a mode of behaviour that Tacitus lauds which is, in the Rome he knows, displaced in time.

More specifically, the *Germania* provides many tidbits of information and conclusions which appear useful and relevant.<sup>16</sup> Tacitus begins the text with several references to the unmixed race, to the purity of the Germans, describing them as not *infectos* by intermarriage with other races (§4). On the other hand, Tacitus notes shortly thereafter that although powerful, they lack stamina and cannot bear thirst or heat (§4). The land in which they dwell, with forests and marshes, produces much, but the fruits are undersized. Amusingly, even the cattle are ugly: “ne armentis quidem suus honor aut gloria frontis” (§5), which Mattingly's Penguin translation gives as “even the cattle lack the handsome heads that are their natural glory.” Tacitus discusses at some length the absence of precious metals such as gold and silver (§5), and notes that even iron is not plentiful (§6); this is significant, because it affects the kind of weaponry the Germans have. Tacitus then turns to a somewhat extended discussion of the battle behaviour and structures, and thence to the governance structure: “Reges ex nobilitate, duces ex virtute sumunt” (§7: They choose their kings for their noble birth, their commanders for their valour). There is a long disquisition on the role of women, who are courageous and close to their men, sometimes prophetic, and who choose to suckle their own children (a point Tacitus certainly made as a

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15 In the preface to his *Tacitus*, Mellor notes that his students in the 1960s considered Tacitus “to be a commentary on the lies and political doublespeak of the Vietnam era” and argues that he was a “seminal figure in the shaping of modern political attitudes”; Mellor, *Tacitus*, viii. Students recognize his searing indictment of manipulative language and ironic temper, and enjoy the personal lens which he employs in all his works — the histories he is adducing are important for their application to the ‘now’ of Roman times as applied to Tacitus himself. More specifically on the *Germania*, Mellor notes that Tacitus's “anger at the fashionable immorality of contemporary Rome leads him to idealize German life in a far more flattering description than his later treatment of the Germans in the *Histories*”; Mellor, *Tacitus*, 15.

16 Here I am quoting the Latin text from Anderson, ed., *Cornelii Taciti De origine et situ Germanorum*, and am adapting Mattingly's Penguin translation where necessary for precision and clarity; Mattingly, trans., *Tacitus: The ‘Agricola’ and the ‘Germania.’* Chapter numbers are provided parenthetically in the text above.



counter to current Roman practice). Their religion and techniques for divination are next, after which Tacitus turns to the social behaviour at meetings and the rules which govern communal behaviour. As will already be clear, the text does not follow previous principles of ethnography, or later ones, jumping somewhat in its content.

The oft-quoted section about battle bravery occurs in §14. It has to be admitted that Tacitus's summary is eloquent, focusing on the courage of both chief and followers and the impossibility for the followers of leaving a battlefield alive if the chief falls. It describes precisely the kind of heroic behaviour that Tacitus wanted the Roman legions to rediscover, as evidenced in his emphasis in his later works on the legions' standing firm in the face of impossible odds or dying with all their wounds in front. The role of the generous leader, who must provide spears and horses and banquets, points up the ways in which the Germanic warriors expected to earn their keep simply through warfare. Tacitus then covers everyday life, including the individual houses which are spread out in villages with space around each home, clothing, and the absolute importance of marriage vows and the role of dowry. He emphasizes particularly their *pudicitia*, 'chastity' or 'virtue,' so that there is no secrecy, no quiet adultery, no opportunity to engage in the sexual vices (§19). (Here, too, Tacitus seems to be commenting more on Roman behaviour than on the ideal perfection of the Germans in their marital rectitude.) He pauses over the raising of children, the importance of feuds and hospitality, drinking and bloodshed, entertainment, and the roles of slaves and freedmen, ending the section with a discussion of land, crops, and burial customs. The second section, the conspectus of the individual tribes, is less quoted by lovers of the *Germania*, though it is more enlightening with respect to Tacitus's purposes. Here he works through the tribes, often noting their specific relationship with Rome — whether as trusted allies or as warriors it is taking Rome a long time to conquer. As his description moves farther north, to tribes which are ever farther from Rome, it becomes more cursory, so that in the final sentences of the text, after summarizing the savage but contented poverty of the Fenni, Tacitus states,

Cetera iam fabulosa: Hellusios et Oxionas ora hominum vultusque,  
 corpora atque artus ferarum gerere: quod ego ut incompertum in medio  
 relinquam. (*Germania* §46)

[What comes after them is the stuff of fables — Hellusii and Oxiones with the faces and features of men, the bodies and limbs of animals. On such unverifiable stories I shall express no opinion.]

Given its importance in the history of the Germanic *Volk*, and its remarkable longevity as a description of Germanic ideals and behaviours, the brevity of the *Germania* is noteworthy. In a handful of pages, Tacitus sketched out this nation, so long in opposition to his own, in terms so memorable that they have claimed a place as accurate and absolute descriptions of the Germanic peoples and their land.

F. R. D. Goodyear notes that the key to the *Germania* is that “Those Roman qualities and values in terms of which the Germans are presented and judged are those of an ideal Rome conceived once to have existed.”<sup>17</sup> Ronald Martin is even clearer about the way in which Tacitus is interested in Germany only as a means to help him focus his attention on the history of Rome and its values. For Martin, the *Germania* is an “ethnographical essay” which prepares Tacitus for his vocation to write history; he therefore finds it particularly apt “that Tacitus makes a comparison with a Germany that had largely ceased to exist by the time he wrote the *Germania*.”<sup>18</sup> Tacitus had his own preconceptions about the ethnography he was writing, distanced from his subject in both space and time.

Why, then, is the *Germania* so often assumed to be a firsthand “legitimate account of early German civilization”?<sup>19</sup> As a text, the *Germania* appears to have arrived, with its reception already fully and enthusiastically formed, in the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries in Europe. There is no evidence of knowledge of the *Germania* before the Renaissance, specifically the 1420s when the manuscript containing the *Germania* moved from the monastery of Hersfeld to northern Europe, yet German commentators such as Andreas Althamer were very soon referring to Tacitus not as an Italian historian but as “Noster Tacitus, Cornelius noster.”<sup>20</sup> According to Donald Kelley, research into Tacitus and the *Germania* became research into the German past, and from the beginning and throughout the ensuing centuries two sets of comparisons continued: Germany past and present, and Germany as against Rome, now Italy.<sup>21</sup> Tacitus provided a pan-Germanic vision for these thinkers; although without other historians or poets (Homer, Herodotus, and so forth), Germany had Tacitus. In particular, the *Germania* provided a rationale for a totalizing vision of the Germanic world, a national character both generous and belligerent, and especially the dream of a free and elected political structure (however mistaken or self-contradictory Tacitus was

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17 Goodyear, *Tacitus*, 10.

18 Martin, *Tacitus*, 57 and 58.

19 Wenghofer, “Moral Revision in Tacitus’ *Germania*,” iii.

20 Kelley, “*Tacitus Noster*,” 154.

21 See Kelley, “*Tacitus Noster*,” 153-60.

in the presentation of this notion). Thus, by the nineteenth century, the *Germania* was a staple school-text in Germany, replete with romantic and nationalistic ideals. Moreover, the *Germania* was equally well received in France and especially in England in the late Renaissance and into the Restoration — in France because the Franks came from the Germans and their name also indicated liberty and freedom, and in England because of its Germanic heritage and the same ideological interpretation of Tacitus as being opposed to tyrants and in favour of political democracy.

Central in the transition to the modern interpretation of Tacitus, and especially of the *Germania*, are two figures: Cardinal Aeneas Silvius Piccolomini, who as Pope Pius II produced a tract which demonstrated, based on the recently discovered *Germania*, that it was the Roman Catholic Church which had rescued the Germans from barbarism and set them on the road to greatness, and Giambattista Vico, who contrarily used Tacitus to trace the development from culture, the decadent civilization of Rome, to nature, the barbaric world in the process of formation with gods and kings and military leaders at its forefront. Moreover, defiant Germany, standing up to the classical behemoth that was Rome, makes a useful icon, and one which was used both in Germany and in England through the ensuing centuries. In England, as Howard Weinbrot argues, Tacitus was “the recognized enemy of tyrants” and thus a pre-eminent constitutional historian, someone who is aware of the need to define the character of a nation (both the Roman nation and, by contrast, Germanic nations), and someone aware that Rome was fading while younger, more energetic nations (such as Britain and its empire) would emerge from the ruins.<sup>22</sup> The mythology that could be attached, however tangentially, to Tacitus as its early proponent was a potent one. So potent was it that during the eighteenth century the Baron de Montesquieu claimed Tacitus for the French, citing the Germanic origin of the Franks as his way into claiming Tacitus as the *esprit* of France. Shortly thereafter the forces of German humanism stepped forward again, led by Johann Gottfried Herder, and later by Johann Gottlieb Fichte, to reclaim Tacitus for German idealism. The French returned to the field only to withdraw from it in the nineteenth century, with the work of Fustel de Coulanges focusing on a Roman origin for France and dismissing the Germanic argument.<sup>23</sup> The results of this ideology are well known; as Krebs summarizes the issue, “the most

22 Weinbrot, “Politics, Taste, and National Identity,” 184. The historiography of Tacitus is an important subject; for some striking contributions to it, see Etter, *Tacitus in der Geistesgeschichte*.

23 For his appreciation of Rome, see *Cité antique* (1863), translated as *The Ancient City*, and for the extensive discrediting of the Germanic hypothesis, see Nicolet, *La fabrique d'une nation*, chap. 9 “Fustel de Coulanges ou le refus de la conquête,” 208-225.

dangerous book [the *Germania*] had done its damage already.”<sup>24</sup> Strikingly, most commentators on the reception history of Tacitus end their analysis of the *Germania* at the year 1945; however, scholars of Anglo-Saxon England continue to refer to Tacitus with a remarkable sense of certainty as to its continuing relevance.

This certainty could well have two genuine elements: writers of late Anglo-Saxon England may have had access to Tacitus, as they did to some other Roman and Greek scholars of late antiquity, and thus may have used Tacitus as an unacknowledged source for their construction of heroism. That is, Tacitus’s construction of heroism and what is often called the *comitatus* might have offered a direct textual exemplar for writers in late Anglo-Saxon England, rather than there being simply a more general sense about the origins of Anglo-Saxon heroic and kingly behaviour. Moreover, this possibility could suggest that the surviving Old English texts which construct what some scholars see as a particularly Tacitean view of tribal behaviour are actually literary constructs rather than ‘authentic’ representations of Anglo-Saxon behaviour. Thus, Rosemary Woolf in a somewhat circular argument fulminates against the survival of the heroic ethos as something delineated by Tacitus but then argues for a proximate source, suggesting that Anglo-Saxon thinkers must have seen Tacitus’s *Germania* in a manuscript that may have been in existence in Fulda in the tenth century — which would mean that the heroic code was something created by recent consideration of Tacitus in the tenth century, not inherited through ten centuries of Germanic military and cultural attitudes.<sup>25</sup> That ninth- or tenth-century manuscript, Woolf proposes, basing her argument on textual scholarship of the *Germania*, is the sole origin, now lost, of all twenty-nine of the surviving manuscripts of the *Germania*, all of which date from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. In other words, Woolf’s suggestion depends on the one *Germania* manuscript which is known with relative certainty to have existed in the first millennium having been examined by an Anglo-Saxon influential enough to establish a new attitude to military duty and loyalty, an attitude derived from a text discussing nations whose relationship to the Anglo-Saxons was now distant, perhaps known only to readers of Bede.

This possibility depends on the availability of the *Germania* in Anglo-Saxon England, or at least nearby. However, Tacitus figures only very sketchily in the *Fontes*

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24 Krebs, “A Dangerous Book,” 299. Krebs also mentions his forthcoming book analysing the *Germania* as “the most dangerous book,” 299 n. 101.

25 See Woolf, “The Ideal of Men Dying with their Lord in the *Germania*,” 175-96.

*Anglo-Saxonici* findings to date.<sup>26</sup> The *Fontes* has two references to Tacitus in its database, one to *Annals* 6.28 from *The Phoenix*, found by M. S. Griffith, and one to *Histories* 5.9 from the translation of Orosius, *Historia contra paganum*, found by Rohini Jayatilaka. The reference to *The Phoenix* is marked by Griffith as a possible source, along with Sidonius, since the different accounts of the phoenix story chime with each other and apparent similarities of vocabulary and syntax could be coincidental.<sup>27</sup> In other words, the *Annals* passage might be a source, but so might Sidonius. Similarly, the reference to the *Histories* in the Old English translation of Orosius is one of fully four possible sources for that passage, and is coded as a possible source, either with or in addition to the other sources, which are the source text itself by Orosius, Isidore's *Chronica*, and the ninth-century *Chronicon* by Freulf of Lisieux. Moreover, Orosius used Tacitus, including the now lost books of the *Histories*, as a source for his own work, which renders unlikely the possibility that the Old English translator went back to Orosius's own source and expanded upon it.<sup>28</sup> Tacitus is but a possible source here as well.

Tracking Tacitus from the opposite approach, and searching for evidence of his having been known in Anglo-Saxon England, provides equally uncertain results. J. D. A. Ogilvy, in *Books Known to Anglo-Latin Writers from Aldhelm to Alcuin (670-804)*, does not list Tacitus. In Ogilvy's later *Books Known to the English, 597-1066*, there are two entries.<sup>29</sup> The first suggests that "The surviving MSS of the *Germania* seem to go back to an archetype at Fulda, where it and the first book of the *Annals* were known in the ninth century. The minor works were preserved only in a ninth-century MS at Hersfeld, an English foundation," and references Wilhelm Levison's *England and the Continent in the Eighth Century*.<sup>30</sup> Levison does not, however, suggest that these works were known in Anglo-Saxon England, even though Ogilvy quotes his statement almost verbatim. Levison is discussing English "symptoms," as he calls them, and this statement about the minor works is followed by a statement that the *Germania* was known in the ninth century at Fulda, another Anglo-Saxon foundation. However, a footnote states unequivocally that "The works of Tacitus were unknown in medieval England" and indicates that the archetype of the Hersfeld and

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26 The Fontes Anglo-Saxonici Project, <<http://fontes.english.ox.ac.uk/>>. Accessed 9 June 2008.

27 M. S. Griffith, e-mail message to author, 10 June 2008.

28 See Syme, *Tacitus*, 215 and notes.

29 See Ogilvy, *Books Known to Anglo-Latin Writers* and *Books Known to the English, 597-1066*.

30 See Levison, *England and the Continent in the Eighth Century*, 144.

Fulda copies was “possibly an Irish exemplar.”<sup>31</sup> While Levison is not entirely clear, it does seem that he is referring to nebulous and uncertain Anglo-Saxon ties, which he thinks may well be Irish rather than specifically Anglo-Saxon. Though he does not say it, he may be postulating, as others have since, Irish influence on an Anglo-Saxon exemplar which then found its way to the Continent. The second reference addresses two books of the *Annals* and one of the *Histories* which are in British Library MS Additional 8904, “which probably falls outside our subject both in time and place of origin.”<sup>32</sup> Ogilvy’s later, and final, word on the subject, in his *Books Known to the English, 597-1066: Addenda et Corrigenda*, indicates that the entirety of the second reference must be deleted.<sup>33</sup> The Sources of Anglo-Saxon Literary Culture (SASLC) project does not have a publicly available list of the classical, patristic, and other sources that it has assigned to contributors who are seeking to find those sources in the surviving literature of Anglo-Saxon England. It seems unlikely that Tacitus would be among those listed, but in the first volume of the SASLC project, Patrick Wormald discusses Tacitus at some length, pointing out that “whatever Tacitus says about the theoretical position in the *Germania*, his *Annals* and *Histories* reveal kings who were leaders of miscellaneous tribal remnants, had extensive treasures, and even founded dynasties.”<sup>34</sup> Wormald notes that the critical issue is the establishment of a warband, which can lead to real power for the leader. Despite Wormald’s muddying of the waters here, it seems that the evidence for knowledge of Tacitus in Anglo-Saxon England, as demonstrated either by his use as a source for an Anglo-Saxon text or by the appearance in Anglo-Saxon England of a manuscript or excerpt — or, indeed, some

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31 Levison, *England and the Continent in the Eighth Century*, 144 n. 1.

32 Ogilvy, *Books Known to the English, 597-1066*, 247.

33 Ogilvy, *Books Known to the English, 597-1066: Addenda et Corrigenda*, 314.

34 See Wormald, “Celtic and Anglo-Saxon Kingship,” 163-64 at 164. Wormald used Tacitus often but with great care. For example, he carefully notes that “what Tacitus said of early German government in an all-too-well-known passage could have been said of any society beyond Rome’s frontier”; Wormald, “Germanic Power Structures,” 117. See also the collections of his writings *Legal Culture in the Early Medieval West* and *The Times of Bede* and the bibliography of his work in Baxter et al., eds., *Early Medieval Studies in Memory of Patrick Wormald*. His last word on the ways in which we worry about our approaches to the past appears in an essay on the notions of the state and the nation: “No medievalist who fails to guard against the anachronistic imputation of contemporary standards to his or her sphere of study can be said to be doing their job” (189). He would have argued the same about applying classical standards. The issue, Wormald argued, was to see and acknowledge what was really present “among the ways whereby humanity has organized itself, no more and no less”; Wormald, “Pre-Modern ‘State’ and ‘Nation,’” 189.

clear evidence of knowledge of Tacitus in this period in Britain — is uncertain at best.<sup>35</sup> Moreover, Tacitean scholarship has dealt more fully with the ninth-century manuscript history of the minor works, concluding that the Hersfeld manuscript is the only one whose existence is certain. It does not appear that Tacitus manuscripts or texts were generally, or even privately, available in Anglo-Saxon England. Moreover, it is worth noting that if they were, these texts were already a millennium old and represented a first rediscovery of Tacitus — and one with its own historiographical concerns. The *Germania* of Tacitus, thus, cannot properly be described as a source, direct or indirect, of Anglo-Saxon or Anglo-Latin texts. Tacitus's involvement in Britain was minimal, to say the most. The cursory description of the land Agricola subdued and the battles and stratagems he used — these are the closest Tacitus came to Britain.

Tacitus's absence from the English context and his limited knowledge of England aside, perhaps the most common *topos* of discussion of the heroic poetry of Old English — and the few instances of what might be termed heroic prose — is a reference to Tacitus and the construction of Germanic tribes in the *Germania*, with emphasis on the notion of the warband or *comitatus*, its heroic idealism, and the development of its leader into a king. This is the second possibility for thinking about Tacitus as a source text: the relevant works of Tacitus as rediscovered in the Renaissance could offer a way to trace exactly how similar Anglo-Saxon and Germanic heroic culture was to its ancestor in antiquity, a blueprint which validated and endorsed a particular kind of national identity. The fullest examples of this *topos* come from the nineteenth century, so for our consideration of the Tacitean origins of Anglo-Saxon society it seems best to start with the orotundities of John Richard Green:

For the fatherland of the English race we must look far away from England itself. In the fifth century after the birth of Christ, the one country which bore the name of England was what we now call Sleswick, a district in the heart of the peninsula which parts the Baltic from the Northern seas. Its pleasant pastures, its black-timbered homesteads, its prim little townships looking down on inlets of purple water, were then but a wild waste of heather and sand, girt along the coast with sunless woodland, broken only on the western side by meadows which crept down to the marshes and the sea. The dwellers in this district were one out of three tribes, all

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35 The new co-ordinator of the SASLC project, Thomas Hall at Notre Dame University, advises that the editor of the volume projected for the letters S-T is Larry Swain. An entry for Tacitus is in contemplation, though the volume is in the very preliminary stages of organization.

belonging to the same Low German branch of the Teutonic family, who at the moment when history discovers them were bound together into a confederacy by the ties of a common blood and a common speech.<sup>36</sup>

This passage opens Green's 1875 work, *A Short History of the English People* (although his definition of "short" amounts to 803 pages), and shortly thereafter, Green more specifically perorates:

In the very earliest glimpse we get of the German race we see them a race of land-holders and land-tillers. Tacitus, the first Roman who looked closely at these destined conquerors of Rome, found them a nation of farmers, pasturing on the forest glades around their villages, and plowing their village fields. A feature which at once struck him as parting them from the civilized world to which he himself belonged was their hatred of cities and their love even within their little settlements of a jealous independence. "They live apart," he says, "each by himself, as woodside, plain, or fresh spring attracts him." And as each dweller within the settlement was jealous of his own isolation and independence among his fellow-settlers, so each settlement was jealous of its independence among its fellow-settlements.<sup>37</sup>

Green follows Tacitus very closely in this section, replicating his account of the social structure, the treatment of criminals, the presentation of legal issues, and the religion. Later on, he takes up the issue of the warband in the ninth century:

From the oldest times of Germanic history each chief or king had his warband, his comrades, warriors bound personally to him by their free choice, sworn to fight for him to the death, and avenge his cause as their own. When Cynewulf of Wessex was foully slain at Merton his comrades "ran at once to the spot, each as he was ready and as fast as he could," and despising all offers of life, fell fighting over the corpse of their lord. The fidelity of the war-band was rewarded with grants from the royal domain; the King became their lord or hlaford, "the dispenser of gifts;" the comrade became his "servant" or thegn.<sup>38</sup>

Here the nineteenth-century historian seamlessly interweaves Tacitus's construction of the Germanic warband with the Cynewulf and Cyneheard episode from the

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36 Green, *A Short History of the English People*, 39.

37 Green, *A Short History of the English People*, 41.

38 Green, *A Short History of the English People*, 90.



Anglo-Saxon Chronicle in a way that underlies most later constructions of Old English heroism. Green's reasons are perfectly understandable: to the naive eye, the connections between the two approaches are obvious and straightforward. Tacitus might not have known anything about Germanic behaviour in battle and allegiance to a single lord except at third hand, but the presentation of this information in the *Germania* offered such an obvious and helpful approach that Green took it without a qualm. His indebtedness to Tacitus is clear; indeed, his belief that Tacitus's construction of Germanic behaviour in the first century is relevant to his construction of Anglo-Saxon behaviour in the early medieval period is absolute. He weaves Tacitus directly and tightly into his narrative as wholly relevant and wholly authentic.

Similarly and at about the same time, William Stubbs devotes a whole chapter to Caesar and Tacitus at the beginning of his *Constitutional History of England*. Stubbs perceives Tacitus as offering what he calls, in a marginal annotation, a sketch with "the several principles of later society" and signs of the "germs and traces of [it] all."<sup>39</sup> His intriguing approach is remarkably catholic in its connectivities:

It is only by viewing the description of the Roman historian as referring to a stage and state of society in which the causes are at work which at different periods and in different regions develop all the three, that any approach can be safely made towards bringing it into relation with the facts of historical sociology. We have not the mark system, but we have the principle of common tenure and cultivation, on which, in India, the native village communities still maintain a primitive practice much older probably than the *Germania*, and of which very distinct vestiges exist still in our own country, in Switzerland, and in Germany. We have not the village system in its integrity, but we have the villages themselves, their relation to the *pagi*, and through them to the *civitas*, and the fact that they were centres or subdivisions for the administration of justice. We have not the manor, but we have the nobleman, we have the warlike magistrate with his attendant *comites*, whose services he must find some way of rewarding, and whose energies he must even in peace find some way of employing. The rich man too has his great house and court, and his family of slaves or dependents, who may be only less than free in that they cultivate the land that belongs to another.<sup>40</sup>

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39 Stubbs, *The Constitutional History of England*, chap. 2 "Caesar and Tacitus," 12-39 at 36 and 37.

40 Stubbs, *The Constitutional History of England*, 36.

Stubbs links the present and the past, Europe and India, Germanic villages and English country houses in a conglomerated whole, using a call to the long Indian tradition to justify the apparent links between Tacitus, his “Roman historian,” and today. Elsewhere, Stubbs is even clearer on the fundamental linkage, going so far as to describe Germany and England as “two so different trees [which] grow apparently from the same seed if not from an identical root.”<sup>41</sup> Here he states that the Teutonic origins of England are, if anything, cleaner than those of Germany because the Germans went through invasion and conquest by Rome, then subjugation under Roman principles, and a gradual reconquest. Thus, although Stubbs sees no need for any allusions to the sources of his ideas, he does seem to suggest that Tacitus’s *Germania* is genuinely more relevant to England than it is to Germany, because its manners and modes of behaviour lead to what he calls the “pure Englishman.”<sup>42</sup>

Modern historians of Anglo-Saxon England are significantly more sceptical than their Victorian forerunners about their sources and tend to invoke historiography carefully to evaluate the extent to which a given source is trustworthy. Some historians do want, sometimes quite desperately, to make a direct link, but for the most part they resist the opportunity. For example, Sir Frank Stenton, in the classic history of the period, uses Tacitus only at the very beginning of the text and only for the existence and origins of the tribes which lay behind the Angles and the Saxons; Tacitus, Ptolemy, and Pliny together comprise the best material for this history, but Stenton nonetheless notes the “obscurity which overhangs all Germany in the age of national migration.”<sup>43</sup> Peter Hunter Blair, on the other hand, in his magisterial *An Introduction to Anglo-Saxon England*, uses Tacitus for evidence on four specific points: his is the earliest reference to the tribe known as the *Anglii* (although Hunter Blair notes the conflict of evidence between Tacitus and Ptolemy, and follows Stenton by concluding with respect to the geographical origin of the *Anglii* that Tacitus is probably right that they did not live inland but on the sea); on the question of kingship of tribes, Hunter Blair points out that Tacitus’s evidence suggests that kings did indeed govern Germanic tribes and tended to develop absolute power, which contradicts Tacitus’s own view that kings were an exception rather than the rule; and he refers in his section on vernacular poetry to the *carmina antiqua* or “ancient songs” of the German

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41 Stubbs, *Germany in the Early Middle Ages*, 1.

42 Stubbs, *Germany in the Early Middle Ages*, 3.

43 Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 11.

tribes.<sup>44</sup> Finally, and most interestingly for my argument here, Hunter Blair points out that “An Anglo-Saxon royal household of the seventh century seems not to have been greatly different either in its membership or in its ideals from the household of a Germanic chieftain in the first century A.D.,” and discusses the ideals of what he calls the Teutonic Heroic Age.<sup>45</sup> Here, then, is the precise characterization of the heroic ethos that is in question.

Patrick Geary, on the other hand, argues that the Romans essentially created the Germanic kingdoms, and instituted their own far-reaching systems to organize political, social, and economic activity in the area which would today be called Germania. For him, Tacitus was already describing a long distant, and perhaps never existing, mode of behaviour and social organization.<sup>46</sup> More particularly, he describes the ways in which a fundamentally Roman sensibility and structure were gradually transformed over the sixth to eighth centuries into the Merovingian, and thereafter the Caroline, world. Geary analyses in some detail the Roman attitudes to its ‘barbarians,’ and specifically notes that the binary opposition between civilization — which was urban and Roman — and barbarism — which was rural and bestial — was fundamental to the Roman construction of other civilizations, and of ethnographies of other civilizations:

One need hardly wonder at the Roman approach to barbarians — the methods, classificatory categories, stereotypes, and purposes of this literature were intimately tied to classical culture. What is perhaps more amazing is that few Roman constructs have endured as long as their image of the barbarians in general and the Germanic peoples in particular.<sup>47</sup>

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44 Blair, *An Introduction to Anglo-Saxon England*, 8, 196, and 330.

45 Blair, *An Introduction to Anglo-Saxon England*, 209.

46 See Geary, *Before France and Germany*, for a detailed and comprehensive analysis. For example, he points out that the notion of the warrior band or *comitatus* was not the “fundamental military unit of the tribe” but “individual warrior societies organized for constant plunder and fighting”; Geary, *Before France and Germany*, 56. A version of this argument intended more for the general reader is his *The Myth of Nations: The Medieval Origins of Europe*, starting with the Roman attitude to barbarians and moving forward to the new barbarians of the sixth century and thence to stable kingdoms in the eighth century. The conclusion argues that there has been a “discontinuous use of certain labels that have come to be seen as ‘ethnic’” which are “historical reconstructions” and not “self-evident and essential components of national identity”; Geary, *The Myth of Nations*, 155 and 158.

47 Geary, *Before France and Germany*, 41.

More particularly Geary decries the maps “based on Tacitus’ *Germania* and Caesar’s description of the Germanic tribes in his *Commentaries*” which are often placed at the beginning of textbooks about the Middle Ages, and the efforts to identify the tribes whom Tacitus describes with later northern tribes.<sup>48</sup> Tacitus does not figure, save as a red herring, in Geary’s discussion of the origins and development of Germanic and Frankish societies.

Similarly, C. J. Arnold analyses the archaeology of the early Anglo-Saxon kingdoms, discussing kinfolk issues, the production of iron tools and weapons, gifts and exchanges, and the creation of kingdoms — all without once referring to the *Germania*, because it simply is not relevant, although Tacitus refers to all of the issues which are central to Arnold’s analysis.<sup>49</sup> Geoffrey Hindley, in his recent survey of the Anglo-Saxons, quotes the *Germania* on the way in which the Germanic peoples took or chose their kings as opposed to their war leaders, only to query the distinction between the two and move on to the issue of how a ritual elevating and demarking kings must have developed. Hindley refers to Tacitus on only one other occasion, quoting him on the *carmina antiqua*, the ‘old songs’ of the Germans, in the context of the life and work of the *scop*. Here, too, the Tacitus reference is a minor part of an argument which moves from Aldhelm to Adelard of Bath, from Homer to the Balkans, from the lyre to the mead halls of *Widsith* and *Deor*. In other words, Tacitus provides one small piece of corroborating evidence, not a fundamental perception of the construction of the nation and its military and manly ethos.<sup>50</sup> Similar care with the source is evident when Barbara Yorke makes use of Tacitus. Initially, she appears to make the nineteenth-century move from Tacitus and the construction of the relationship of the king and his warband as central to the success and failure of the Germanic provinces to the interaction between the king and his warriors as being a major concern of Old English heroic poetry.<sup>51</sup> She later returns to Tacitus in her discussion of the *bretwalda* ‘overlord, the king of all Britain’ and of the need for continual warfare in order to maintain military success based on the ethos of the warband. Here, however, she contextualizes her use of the Roman historian, describing Tacitus, rightly, as having “various pertinent observations to make about the strengths and weaknesses of such a system.”<sup>52</sup> Thus, rather than using Tacitus as a source, Yorke actually quotes him as a

48 Geary, *Before France and Germany*, 42.

49 See Arnold, *An Archaeology of the Early Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms*.

50 See Hindley, *A Brief History of the Anglo-Saxons*, 27 and 236.

51 See Yorke, *Kings and Kingdoms of Early Anglo-Saxon England*, 17.

52 Yorke, *Kings and Kingdoms of Early Anglo-Saxon England*, 158.

fellow historian, using Tacitus's analysis of the Germanic tribal system as a parallel example for her own arguments about the development of kingship in Anglo-Saxon England.

Finally, Andrew Reynolds in his *Later Anglo-Saxon England: Life and Landscape* has the following:

Earlier this century scholars viewed the early English as a largely free society, which operated itself via communal social systems of the type described in the classical writer Tacitus' work *Germania*. Tacitus was writing at the close of the first century AD and his view of continental Germanic society was itself coloured by his own classical world-view. Gradual reassessment of the available evidence has revealed that, at least during the period covered by this book, Anglo-Saxon society was anything but free. It is now widely accepted, for example, that the social and administrative frameworks of Anglo-Norman England owed much more to the efficiency of Late Anglo-Saxon social organisation than to any Norman import. [. . .] Thus, it can be seen that the Anglo-Saxon world was very much an ordered and structured place with clear dividing lines between social classes based upon legal requirements and rights, and the benefits of wealth.<sup>53</sup>

Reynolds's focus is later Anglo-Saxon England and its frameworks and structures, and he clearly establishes Tacitus's lack of relevance to that period. Elsewhere in the book, he follows James Campbell in perceiving an ordered and highly structured state, not a free and unstructured world in early Anglo-Saxon England. In short, Reynolds weighs the evidence for the "communal social systems" described by Tacitus and rejects them for later Anglo-Saxon England, by implication also for early Anglo-Saxon England and — indicating that Tacitus had a view of Germanic society "coloured by his own classical world-view" — for Germany in the first century as well.<sup>54</sup>

In one respect, it should be noted, the *Germania* is a very useful text for historians and archaeologists. Tacitus clearly did some research, although as Tacitean scholars point out acerbically, his research referred to an earlier period. However, his details of behaviour can be extremely useful. Stephen Glosecki finds the beast-linkages Tacitus makes concerning helmets useful for considering paganism in the

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53 Reynolds, *Later Anglo-Saxon England*, 57.

54 Reynolds, *Later Anglo-Saxon England*, 57.

period.<sup>55</sup> Sam Newton also discusses animal linkages, quoting Tacitus on the use of the boar emblem but then referring to the scholarship which indicates that “this belief was maintained for many centuries throughout the Northlands.”<sup>56</sup> Similarly, Audrey Meaney quotes chapter 8 in reference to the sacral and prophetic aspect of women, but when she examines the evidence, she concludes that when Old English *ides* appears, it has no moral connotations but means “noble woman, lady.”<sup>57</sup> More particularly, she compares the Tacitean picture of the honoured noble woman to the depiction of the exemplary queens in *Beowulf* and in the gnomic poems, demonstrating that the behaviours elucidated by Tacitus are those which are lauded in the Anglo-Saxon texts.<sup>58</sup> Finally, the archaeologist Malcolm Todd also ignores the general framework of Tacitus’s argument in favour of his details of usage, and teases out many parallels and analogues among the Germanic tribes and among all the northern and eastern European tribes. Thus, for example, he corrects Tacitus on the German diet: where Tacitus indicates wild fruits, fresh game, and curdled milk, Todd notes from archaeological sources (settlements and the entrails of corpses in peat-bogs) that grains, including barley and wheat, were the major element in the German diet; similarly, the existence of wine vessels in funeral assemblages throughout Germany suggests a wider distribution of wine than just along the borders with the Roman empire.<sup>59</sup> Where the details mentioned in Tacitus are corroborated by the historical and archaeological record stretching between Tacitus and the foundation or continuation of Anglo-Saxon England, Tacitus can provide valuable evidence of the continuity of cultural patterns.

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55 See Glosecki, *Shamanism and Old English Poetry*. The *Germania* is a constant presence in the book, discussed on nine occasions, sometimes at length. Glosecki does mistakenly agree with Tacitus that the Germans did not have iron, but otherwise he quotes Tacitus’s *Germania* as one among a host of sources. Slightly less cautious than Glosecki is Hawkes in her “Symbolic Lives: The Visual Evidence,” 311-38. In the same volume, Hines is uncertain about the utility of references to Tacitus, quoting him “for what his testimony is worth” but nonetheless uses the *Germania* several times to support his argument in “Religion: The Limits of Knowledge,” 375-401 at 388.

56 Newton, *The Origins of ‘Beowulf’*; 40.

57 Meaney, “The *Ides* of the Cotton Gnostic Poem,” 160.

58 See Meaney, “The *Ides* of the Cotton Gnostic Poem,” 158-175. Fell makes a similar point, though she expresses great scepticism about using the work of someone writing about Germanic tribes in the first century to apply to Anglo-Saxons in the fifth; Fell, *Women in Anglo-Saxon England*, 26 and 31-32.

59 See Todd, *Everyday Life of the Barbarians*, 77-79.

Thus, Tacitus's *Germania* as a source text is now highly mediated in historical approaches to Anglo-Saxon England.<sup>60</sup> James Campbell demonstrates the awkwardness of referring to Tacitus as a sole source: he cannily quotes J. M. Kemble and especially William Stubbs for the idea that the laws and institutions of Anglo-Saxon England "were genuinely derived from and reflected [. . .] the German world described by Tacitus in the first century."<sup>61</sup> Thus, Campbell avoids establishing a context within which to read Tacitus in the modern era, but propounds at some length the thesis that Stubbs, though not fashionable, was a great historian — thus tacitly agreeing with his construction of Tacitus. A similar careful clarity about the text is evident in the work of some literary scholars. Perhaps most famously, E. G. Stanley discusses the *Germania* under the heading "The Search for Germanic Antiquities" and describes the "ethnographical romanticism" of Tacitus, which corresponded to that of the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century scholars who simply applied Tacitus's construction of Germanic society in the first century to Anglo-Saxon times.<sup>62</sup> Stanley later describes the linkages between animals and Woden as a knee-jerk reaction by scholars: "Involuntarily these scholars were reminded of Tacitus, and involuntarily they identified their interest in a more primitive Germanic age with the interest of the poets."<sup>63</sup> Thus, Stanley firmly points out that scholars infected with the virus of directly linking Tacitus to the much later Anglo-Saxon world were in error, engaged in an 'involuntary' reaction based on their desire to find the Anglo-Saxon past in Germanic behaviour as reported secondhand by a Roman noble.

Allen Frantzen more recently makes a similar point:

One of the strongest desires evident in *Beowulf* criticism is the wish to invoke the historical perspective of ancient Germanic institutions as

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60 I am leaving to one side the explosion of scholarly activity with respect to late antiquity and the early Middle Ages. However, the call to Tacitus is not heard here. Wirth, for example, refers to Tacitus only four times while canvassing the entire field of Roman foreign policy with respect to Germany: three of these references occur in notes, while one reference in the text, at p. 28, seems to be to the *Annals* or the *Histories*, referring to how Tacitus played down the problems with power blocks and raids; Wirth, "Rome and its Germanic Partners," 23 n. 40, 24 n. 45, and 26 n. 55, and 28. See also Goetz, Jarnut, and Pohl's collection *Regna and Gentes*, which focuses precisely on the notions of a *gentes* and their *regna* and makes almost no reference to Tacitus.

61 Campbell, ed., Epilogue, *The Anglo-Saxons*, 242. Campbell makes the same argument, at greater length, in "Stubbs and the English State," chap. 11 of his *The Anglo-Saxon State*.

62 See Stanley, *The Search for Anglo-Saxon Paganism*, 63 and 64.

63 Stanley, *The Search for Anglo-Saxon Paganism*, 80.

background to the poem. The view of Anglo-Saxon culture taken in the *Norton* is not Anglo-Saxon at all; it is drawn from Tacitus's *Germania*, written in the first century. Tacitus was a Roman historian, but his influence over Anglo-Saxon literary history is great.<sup>64</sup>

Frantzen works through this historiography from Klaeber to Wrenn to Goldsmith, carefully following the literary scholarship on the matter. He notes that "Tacitus has become a beginning for *Beowulf* earlier than English culture [. . .] an anchor to antiquity, a link between the wilds of the North and the civilized pursuits of Anglo-Saxon culture."<sup>65</sup> Sadly, however, the strictures — even the sarcasm — of Stanley's and Frantzen's ilk have gone largely unnoticed — or noticed but not acknowledged — by those who mine the quarry of Tacitus for a pure Germanic origin filtered through an even purer Roman sensibility.

My own contribution to this attempted debunking of the myth — or perhaps, more correctly, the de-linkage of the coupling between the *Germania* and Anglo-Saxon attitudes to heroism — was a piece in a *Festschrift* for E. G. Stanley which attempted to demonstrate that Tacitus owed as much — perhaps a great deal more — to his own desire to re-ignite the ferocious bravery and steadfastness of the Roman legions against invaders as he did to any ethnographic desire to describe the German tribes — about which Tacitus also had no firsthand knowledge.<sup>66</sup> Since then, Stephen J. Harris, a former doctoral student of Allen J. Frantzen, has also contributed a learned and detailed discussion of the *Germania*, its confused manuscript history, its function in the Germanophilia of nineteenth-century England in particular, and its development into a standard reference for Old English scholars.<sup>67</sup>

Nonetheless, the Tacitus references continue. Those in literary studies can best be divided into two kinds: scholarly analyses, which can be more highly nuanced or somewhat accepting of the tradition, and introductions for the beginning student. The scholarly analyses can be as sly and careful as those in Roberta Frank's several articles, which dance around the issue of Tacitus with some delight. For example, discussing heroic literature with respect to the *Battle of Maldon*, she includes Caesar

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64 Frantzen, *Desire for Origins*, 174.

65 Frantzen, *Desire for Origins*, 174.

66 See Toswell, "Tacitus, Old English Heroic Poetry, and Ethnographic Preconceptions," 493-507.

67 See Harris, *Race and Ethnicity in Anglo-Saxon Literature*, 18-29, with superb references at 196-204. His analysis is particularly learned and helpful.



and Tacitus on the ideal of men dying with their lord in an erudite gallimaufry of references from feudal Japan to Roland to El Cid to the Bible to Old Norse texts.<sup>68</sup> In another article specifically on that ideal, she starts with the reception history of Tacitus, passes by Rosemary Woolf's article mentioned above, and discusses the many contexts and purposes of the theme of men dying with their lord in northern cultures.<sup>69</sup> In her classic study of the poet of *Beowulf* as having a particular sense of history, she considers not only Tacitus but Rudolf of Fulda as representing a Roman line of laudatory analysis of Germanic customs and rites, before turning to Widukind and his records of the great deeds of Saxon leaders.<sup>70</sup> Careful in a more cautious sense is Milton Gatch, who discusses Tacitus along with Julius Caesar, prudently indicating that the simplistic approach of Stanley Greenfield — which describes a “fusion of the ancient Germanic ideal described by Tacitus with the Christian idealism of eighth-century England” — is untenable.<sup>71</sup> Gatch then establishes the intellectual context within which Tacitus was writing and considers Tacitus himself and his strong bias against “moral turpitude and physical softness” but concludes that with Caesar and some less well-known Latin writers he still commands our attention.<sup>72</sup> He focuses specifically on the most difficult element of the argument, the notion that individuals had personal freedom and elected the king, whose power was established and limited by custom. Gatch notes the romanticized desire to believe in these notions, but then shifts into a Jungian and ethnographic mode to discuss the mythic and legendary tales of the heroic age of a culture. He slides away from Tacitus, clearly demarcating his *Germania* as something that scholars have wanted to see as central and critical, but without ever quite rejecting it. Instead, he places Anglo-Saxon constructions of heroism in the mythographic context espoused by a Joseph Campbell or a Carl Jung. Gatch performs here a very clever and perhaps even more persuasive move than James Campbell's; moreover, his transmutation is one which elucidates but then avoids the problem of just how deeply scholars desire to use Tacitus as representing a real Germanic past while at the same time acknowledging that to do so is fraught with difficulties both theoretical and practical. Even more cautiously, Nicholas Howe scrupulously avoids any mention at all of Tacitus, even though making use of the

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68 See Frank, “*The Battle of Maldon* and Heroic Literature.”

69 See Frank, “The Ideal of Men Dying with their Lord in *The Battle of Maldon*.”

70 See Frank, “The *Beowulf* Poet's Sense of History.”

71 Gatch, *Loyalties and Traditions*, 53-55 at 54, citing Greenfield, *A Critical History*, 11.

72 Gatch, *Loyalties and Traditions*, 54.

*Germania* might have seemed critical to his argument about migration and mythmaking, the ethnography of Anglo-Saxon England and its origins.<sup>73</sup>

Others, however, find Tacitus an important and unbiased help to scholarly argumentation. Two examples suffice here. Richard North sees Tacitus as central to his interpretation in his *Heathen Gods in Old English Literature*. At one point he notes that Tacitus wrote for “moral-patriotic reasons” and that Tacitus can be cryptic or cursory in the *Germania* so that it becomes necessary that “we read him in combination with some of the Eddic and Scaldic texts that can be identified as genuinely pre-Christian.”<sup>74</sup> North demonstrates this theory with a detailed examination of the worship of Nerthus, depending on the *Germania* throughout and arguing for a male god, the consort of the earth. This idea of Terra Mater, the earth, marrying a male god drives the argument through much of the book and is, North argues, an inheritance in the Germanic world of the cult of Nerthus. Throughout the monograph, the *Germania* recurs again and again as a source, as an originary moment for detailed arguments about the groves of the gods, the Roman gods and their Germanic and Norse analogues, and sacred festivals and behaviours appropriate to them. It might almost be suggested that without the *Germania*, the argument about the centrality of the heathen gods in Old English literature could not be attempted — certainly not in the form it finds here. Similarly, Donald Scragg in his edition of *The Battle of Maldon* notes that

The effect of this vocabulary is to reinforce the basic metaphor of the poem, which is the representation of contemporary men and events as part of a heroic society similar to that reported of Germanic warriors of the first century A.D. by the Roman historian Tacitus. That Byrhtnoth and his companions did not live as a Germanic chief surrounded by his *comitatus* is beyond question. The poet’s use of traditional poetic vocabulary to describe them and their actions reminds the audience of earlier poetry which told of the deeds of legendary heroes who fought within the *comitatus* system, and suggests that the achievement of these latter-day heroes is comparable with that of those of old.<sup>75</sup>

Scragg’s use of the term *comitatus* and his construction of a diachronic structure of Germanic military behaviour from Tacitus in 98 C.E. to the contemporary society of

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73 See Howe, *Migration and Mythmaking in Anglo-Saxon England*.

74 North, *Heathen Gods in Old English Literature*, 10-11 & *passim*.

75 Scragg, ed., *The Battle of Maldon*, 32.

late Anglo-Saxon England conducts the reader of his introduction into a belief in the longstanding and deeply-rooted tradition of honour and heroism in Germanic societies, with a particular focus on the theme of dying with one's lord. In other words, he appears to suggest that the same attitudes hold for almost eleven hundred years. Although that tradition is, as Scragg points out, admittedly legendary in 991 and its aftermath, his construction of it implies its fundamental importance to the formation of Anglo-Saxon society.<sup>76</sup>

Scholars make their own choices about how to evaluate the material they read, it might well be argued. Even though Scragg's edition of the *Battle of Maldon* could be described as a student edition as much as it is a scholarly one, still the arguments that it contains are subject to the poking and prying that scholarly integrity demands. However, perhaps the most important shorthand use of Tacitus with respect to the heroic code is that in student introductions to the subject. Here, scholars of the field introduce potential new scholars to the main arguments and their eddies. Here, the foundations are laid for the ways in which future scholars will develop their approaches to the field. Here, one might argue, is the greatest need for a totalizing view of the material, for an approach which gives students something to hang on to that they recognize. Or, one might argue, here is the need for establishing Anglo-Saxon England and Old English in a broader context, for bringing in comparative ethnography or comparative literary studies in the way that Roberta Frank so elegantly does. Yet, I suggest, here is where the use of Tacitus as a shorthand introduction to the theme of indomitable heroism actually causes the greatest damage, because it puts this tired and clichéd reference straight into the mindset of the next generation of students of Old English in the English-speaking world. Two examples, one brief and one at slightly greater length, suffice.

First, Dan Donoghue in his *Old English Literature: A Short Introduction*, intended for undergraduates or the general reader, describes Tacitus's *Germania* as "the starting point and the *locus classicus* for discussions of the *comitatus* (his word, meaning

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76 Tacitus's use of the term *comes* 'companion' and its collective cognate *comitatus* is generally accepted as having a specific meaning in late imperial Rome, connected to the *comites* or loosely 'counts' who held trusted posts away from the imperial court. In later antiquity, the term developed other, equally specific meanings which do not involve the sense of the *heorðgeneatas* 'hearth-companions' or 'sworn comrades' generally understood by the Germanic context. Tacitus used the term infrequently in the *Germania*, though it does appear in the critical chapters 13 and 14 concerning the tribal structures and battle. See Blackman and Betts, *Concordantia Tacitea*, vol. 1.

‘retinue’) and other aspects of the early Germanic military world.”<sup>77</sup> More specifically, he quotes the classic statement about men scorning to outlive their battle leader, and though the leader might fight for victory, the retainers fight for their leaders. Donoghue does judiciously note that although this passage applies “In an obvious, commonsensical way” to texts such as the *Battle of Maldon*, the society of late Anglo-Saxon England was “far more cosmopolitan than the tribal culture found in the pages of *Germania*.”<sup>78</sup> Nonetheless, Donoghue establishes a close linkage between Tacitus’s construction of Germanic military behaviour and the behaviour of warriors in late Anglo-Saxon England. Similarly, the most widely used textbook of introductory Old English is Bruce Mitchell and Fred Robinson’s *A Guide to Old English*. This textbook is now in its seventh edition and represents the gold standard against which other introductory textbooks measure themselves. Mitchell and Robinson start their discussion of Old English literature with the statement

the Germanic tribes who settled in England in the fifth century brought with them the Germanic heroic code. What we learn of it from Old English literature generally confirms the observations of Tacitus in his *Germania*. The salient points are these. The Germanic warrior was a member of a *comitatus*, a warrior-band. Life was a struggle against insuperable odds, against the inevitable doom decreed by a meaningless fate — *Wyrd*, which originally meant “what happens.”<sup>79</sup>

Mitchell and Robinson continue their discussion with statements about the absence of any belief in an afterlife, the possible immortality offered by *lof* or the praise of those still living, and therefore the reckless disregard for his life that a pagan warrior would have as a result of having been brought up in this tradition.<sup>80</sup> The notion of the *comitatus* recurs through the next few pages, especially as the eternal triangle of Anglo-Saxon literature is described as one of loyalty, not sexual love. Mitchell and Robinson, therefore, consider that the evidence available from such Old English texts as the Cynewulf and Cyneheard episode in the Parker Chronicle, *Beowulf*, the *Battle of Brunanburh*, and the *Battle of Maldon* confirms the construction of Germanic male

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77 Donoghue, *Old English Literature*, 16. Tacitus returns, briefly, on p. 34, again in connection with the motives of warriors and their loyalty to their lord.

78 Donoghue, *Old English Literature*, 16.

79 Mitchell and Robinson, eds., *A Guide to Old English*, 135.

80 Mitchell and Robinson, eds., *A Guide to Old English*, 136.

behaviour found in the *Germania* of Tacitus. In this, the best-known introductory text for the study of Old English, originary status is ascribed to Tacitus's *Germania* for the code of male military behaviour in place in Anglo-Saxon England, to judge by the extant Old English heroic texts. The *Germania* lies at the heart of the construction of the heroic ethos. It should not.

Intriguingly, scholars of Old English literature have not turned to the *Agricola*, either for its discussion of Britain and its tribes, for its focus on Agricola's campaigns in Britain rather than his whole life, or especially for the speeches made by Calgacus and by Agricola as the Britons and Romans, respectively, prepared for the decisive battle in the Roman conquest of the British isles. Tacitus's father-in-law Agricola, the biographical subject of his first work, was the most famous governor and perhaps the most successful conqueror of Britain. Recent archaeological discoveries in the far north of Scotland raise the possibility that his conquest of Britain ran the full length of the island, making him a genuinely remarkable military figure.<sup>81</sup> Moreover, unlike the hapless Publius Quintilius Varus, who a generation earlier lost fully three legions in the Teutoburg Forest, specifically at what is now recognized as Kalkriese, to the Germanic leader Arminius, Agricola deftly navigated the complex and shifting loyalties of his legions and their allies and soundly defeated the native tribes of Britain.<sup>82</sup> Tacitus recounts the speeches of the two war-leaders: the first is Calgacus to the Caledonian forces reminding them that they are the last reserves of Britain, fighting to preserve their freedom and not become slaves, and denigrating the nations fighting with the Romans; Agricola speaks similarly, although Tacitus carefully indicates that his men are already eager to fight. They engage in what is almost an early version of a *flyting*, though they do not speak directly to each other in Tacitus's construction of the two speeches. Agricola congratulates his men on their accomplishments during seven years of campaigns and battles, indicating that this is the last battle if they win and advising them to keep their eyes to the front (an image that Tacitus makes great use of later in the *Annals* and the *Histories*). Agricola notes that they do not have the detailed knowledge of the terrain or the supplies that the enemy has, but "sed manus et arma et in his omnia" (however, we have our hands, and swords in them,

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81 See, for example, Henderson, who revisits Tacitus's text and its "World's-End quality" in the speeches to argue that *mons Graupius*, the battlefield where Agricola crushed the Caledonian army, must have been well in the northern heartland of Caledonia; Henderson, "Agricola in Caledonia," esp. 330.

82 See <<http://www.varusforschung.de>> for details of the battle, and <<http://www.livius.org/te-tg/teutoburg/teutoburg-kalkriese.html>> for the site. Accessed 25 October 2011.

and these are all that matters)<sup>83</sup> — an image which anticipates the nexus of hands and swords at the heart of many Old English heroic poems, including *Beowulf*. Agricola continues,

quod ad me attinet, iam pridem mihi decretum est neque exercitus neque ducis terga tuta esse. proinde et honesta mors turpi vita potior, et incolumitas ac decus eodem loco sita sunt; nec inglorium fuerit in ipso terrarum ac naturae fine cecidisse. (*Agricola* §33.18-22)

[For myself, I made up my mind long ago that neither an army nor a commander can avoid danger by running away. So — although an honourable death would be better than a disgraceful attempt to save our lives — our best chance of safety does in fact lie in doing our duty. And there would be glory, too, in dying — if die we must — here where the world and all created things come to an end.]

Agricola thus focuses on honour and pragmatism, on glory and death, and particularly on the metonymic linkage between hands and swords. After his speech and its delighted reception by his soldiers, after the two sides are arrayed for battle, it is hardly surprising that Tacitus reports of Agricola, “dimisso equo pedes ante vexilla constitit” (§35.23-24: he sent away his horse and took up his position on foot in front of the colours). Agricola leads from in front of his men, inspiring them by his example, and rejecting the possibility of escape offered were he to keep his horse nearby. He sounds downright Germanic, even Anglo-Saxon. In fact, he sounds like Byrhtnoth in the *Battle of Maldon*. And yet he is not; rather, he is a pragmatic Roman seeking to complete the conquest of Britain with a last successful battle.

Tacitus has in one very profound respect been a source: he has been a source of thinking about the Anglo-Saxons, following in a long Continental tradition which ended in 1945 and a British tradition which largely began in the nineteenth century and continues today. Tacitus’s assessment of the Germanic tribes and his very occasional use of the term *comes* (3 times in the *Germania* of a total of 21 occurrences in Tacitus) and *comitatus* (4 times in the *Germania* of a total of 42 occurrences in Tacitus)<sup>84</sup> describes

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83 Ogilvie and Richmond, eds., *Cornelii Taciti De vita Agricolae*, §33.17; quotations are taken from this standard edition. The translation is from the Penguin translation by Mattingly, trans., *Tacitus: The ‘Agricola’ and the ‘Germania,’* 85. See also Delz, ed., *P. Cornelii Taciti Agricola*, for the Latin text, and Heubner, *Kommentar zum Agricola des Tacitus*.

84 See Blackman and Betts, *Concordantia Tacitea*, vol. 1.

a brotherhood of military opponents, and leads to conclusions about the Anglo-Saxon military structure and the comradeship exemplified in a construct called the heroic code. An idealistic notion of heroic military behaviour exists in the extant Old English poetry and prose; references to it often, nearly always, buttress that evidence with a judicious call on Tacitus. The comments of Tacitus on the pagan attitudes of the Germans, and comments in a similar vein on the role of women, serve as the building blocks for the construction of Anglo-Saxon culture. Where Tacitus might at best provide a useful analogy, we are tempted to find a source; where Tacitus could offer a parallel approach, we identify teleology. Scholars of Anglo-Saxon England therefore read back, through Tacitus, into a construction of Anglo-Saxon behaviour that reflects a classical construction of Germanic behaviour of several centuries earlier. To some extent this tendency legitimates a desire to interpret cultural and social behaviour as 'natural' to a particular nation or group of tribes by demonstrating its longevity, and to some extent this tendency does reflect particular behaviour patterns as proven by the archaeological or historical record and thereby deserves its assumed legitimacy. However, there seems to be little basis for the scholarly desire to link Tacitus and his ethnography of the German tribes to Anglo-Saxon behaviours in a different millennium and place. Perhaps it is time to replace Tacitus's construction of heroism with some citations from the many recipients of the Victoria Cross. They, too, seem to exemplify the precise kind of indomitable bravery and honour that scholars of Anglo-Saxon England identify in the heroic literature of the period; moreover, they are the same distance in time away from their Old English literary counterparts.<sup>85</sup>

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85 The stories of Canadian World War II Victoria Cross recipients are readily available at <[http://www.mysteriesofcanada.com/VC\\_Recipients/vc\\_recipients.htm](http://www.mysteriesofcanada.com/VC_Recipients/vc_recipients.htm)>. Accessed 28 May 2010.

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