

Ethnography and the Gods in Tacitus' *Germania*

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There was no ethnography of religion in antiquity.¹ The reasons are straightforward: ethnography was not a discipline, and there was no ancient concept of religion. What we usually mean by ancient ethnography is in fact ethnographic writing, the written traces of a much wider discourse about the 'unity and diversity of mankind.'² Traces of ethnographic writing can be recovered from histories and geographies, and also from drama, epic poetry, elegy and the novel, philosophical dialogues, satire, medical treatises and more besides. Sciences did exist in antiquity. Mathematics, physics and astronomy were all defined spheres of study, each with their canonical literatures, and it was even possible to write of *physikoi*, *mathematikoi* and *astrologoi* and so on, even if few were paid for their labours. But ethnography-as-a-science is a modern invention.³ As for what we include in the term 'religion', ancients were perfectly able to write about cosmologies and rituals, as well as about the temples and images of the gods; but they did not reify 'religions' as we do, treating it as a separate sphere of life or field of enquiry. My aim in this chapter is to ask how these religious matters entered into ancient ethnographic discourse, taking as an example a text that has sometimes been presented as the most accomplished piece of Roman ethnography, and in the phrase '*interpretatio romana*' has provided the material for a highly influential paradigm of religious contact and cultural translation.

Ethnographic writing and the divine in classical antiquity

Religious matters often feature in ethnographic writing, but they were not an essential component of descriptions of the 'Other'. The *Researches* of Herodotus, like the *Germania*, pay special attention to foreign gods and rituals; by contrast, the Hippocratic *Airs, Waters, Places* and the relevant books (3–5) of the Elder Pliny's *Natural History* hardly mention them. Perhaps these differences reflect the personal interests of the authors in question. But other factors may well have played a part. Many texts seek to relate the habits and appearances of different peoples to the

physical environments they inhabited. Perhaps it was more difficult to integrate the religious lives of different peoples into those schematic interpretative frames than it was to incorporate their diet and disease, sexuality and temperament and *ethe* in general. We might expect that rituals and the gods would be more prominent in those ethnographies that related the descent of particular peoples from Greek or Trojan heroes. In fact this is rarely the case, except when omens and oracles are described as guiding the founding fathers or confirming their title to new lands. Perhaps this is another example of us overemphasizing the ‘othering’ dimension of ethnographic discourse.⁴ One effect of the genealogical approach to ancient ethnographic enquiry was to flatten the moral and cultural differences between Greek and Roman authors and readers and their new found kin. Indeed some of our most important sources on Roman ritual are those Greek works, such as Dionysius of Halicarnassus’ *Roman Antiquities*, that seek to make connections between Greeks and Romans, rather than to signal difference.

Whatever the reasons, the gods and their rituals had no fixed place in ancient ethnographic writing. This made religious matters both an optional component of descriptions, and also an element that might be freely varied for other reasons, without disturbing the grand schematic lines of vision.⁵ That situation contrasts markedly with the place allocated religious matters in the ethnographic writing that emerged from the encounters between Europeans and other peoples in the early modern period. For a start, early modern Europeans travelled with a mental map of the cosmos that already ordered peoples according to their religions. The most common taxonomy was Christians, Moslems, Jews and Heathens.⁶ These four were naturally not regarded as of equivalent value. Savages might be equated with pre-Lapsarian man or as monstrous semi-beasts, akin to the most extreme classical representations of the barbarian.⁷ But whether regarded as innocents or bestial semi-humans, their religious characterization was clear. During the sixteenth century, the concept of religions emerged and began to be applied to the rituals and deities of various peoples, especially those of the New World.⁸ Some of these religions were idealized by Enlightenment *philosophes* and compared favourably with the practices of the Church.⁹ Religion assumed a new importance in the ethnographic writing of the late nineteenth century when the creation of comparative religious studies led to a more systematic interest in the diversity of rituals and belief systems. As anthropologists have become more interested in semantics and symbolism, so the study of religious practice and cosmology have come to be regarded as particularly likely to reveal the ‘key’ to the concealed logic of alien societies and cultures. Ritual and cosmology are now central to anthropologies of all kinds. This is one measure of the distance between our ethnography and the ancient approach.

Yet, even if religious matters were not central to ancient ethnographic discourse, they were still employed on occasion to explore issues of difference and similarity. One reason is that almost all ancient religious systems were polytheistic: it was perhaps an obvious exercise to hold up two lists of gods and seek the equivalent terms. That procedure must have taken place on countless occasions from the archaic period until late antiquity. Most assertions of equivalence or identity must have served the very local and temporary needs of travellers and settlers, traders and

soldiers, colonizers and colonized. What god was worshipped in this foreign land or alien temple? Philosophers had other questions. How might domestic theology be extended to incorporate these others or to operate in a strange land? Discussions like those contained in Cicero's *On the Nature of the Gods* or in Plutarch's *On Isis and Osiris* and *On the decline of oracles* stood in a tradition that stretched back to the Ionian Presocratics. But sophisticated attempts to bring rational order to the diversity of observed cults were probably of fairly esoteric interest, even among ancient elites. More common, and more important, were the issues potentially raised by the contingent and temporary identifications of deities. What, in particular, should we understand by statements about the equivalence of two deities.¹⁰ Consider Herakles and Melqart. Should we understand them as alternative and equally valid or contingent names for the same entity? Or that Greeks correctly, and Phoenicians less correctly, applied these different names to him? Or simply that the nearest value to 'Herakles' in the Phoenician system was 'Melqart' and vice versa? And was that pair fortuitously found? And if so, on one occasion or on many? Or was it cultivated and engineered, by priests and scholars, on the colonial middle grounds of the western Mediterranean? Later it is certainly possible to see or infer the syncretic engineering of new deities like Serapis, Mithras and Jupiter Optimus Maximus Dolichenus. But behind the equation Herakles–Melqart lies a long and complex history of exchanges and approximations, each with its own significance and each serving different interests.¹¹

Modern writing about translation or *interpretatio* often confuses several kinds of identification. The limits of translatability were keenly understood in antiquity, as the *Germania* makes clear: even in late antiquity, Hermes, Mercury and Thoth were not quite synonyms.¹² The bold claim made by Isis in Apuleius' *Metamorphoses* to be the truest avatar of the Great Mother of Pessinus, Ceropian Minerva, Venus of Paphos, Dictyan Diana, Prosperine, Ceres of Eleusis, Juno, Bellona, Hecate and Rhamnusia is at once a claim to transcend conventional divine categories and an acknowledgement of the power still evoked by each one of these separate names.¹³ Ethnographic writing was only one locus of religious translation. It was certainly not the most significant. Much more influential were the establishment of cults such as that of Mater Magna Deorum, in which form Cybele was worshipped in the Roman West, and the efforts made in many Western communities to find Roman names for indigenous gods. The composition and reading of texts about religion was arguably the smallest part of ancient religious experience. Yet inevitably such texts – and especially Tacitus' *Germania* – have often been used to provide a key to the entire subject.¹⁴ My argument in this chapter is that what Tacitus chose to do with religion in the *Germania* makes views of that kind untenable. It does, however, provide a rich case study of the uses of religion in the description of alien peoples, and their insertion into narratives of various kinds.

The *Germania*

It would be impossible to attempt anything but the shortest summary of the critical reception of the *Germania* of Tacitus.¹⁵ Nor is it my aim to add another such treatment to the series of authoritative commentaries that stretch from that of Norden to those of Lund and Rives.¹⁶ But I do need to establish some parameters for my own reading of the text, and to make explicit my starting assumptions. It is (now) a truism that ethnographic discourse consists of a set of transactions between authors and readers, transactions from which those peoples described are largely excluded.¹⁷ The meanings given for both their outlandish and their familiar habits are generated not by themselves but by cultural play between those who write and those who read about them. Ostensibly subjects of the text under consideration, the Germans can therefore be seen as marginalized from a set of conversations entirely internal to Roman society. The *Germania* had its currency among Romans, not among Germans.¹⁸ By this I do not mean that Germany was merely a province of the Roman imaginary, nor that Tacitus' account was a fiction, or a simple mirror of Rome.¹⁹ I take it for granted that the text contains not only much truth, but also facts established by careful and diligent research. Some pieces of information can only really be satisfactorily explained as deriving from the testimony of native informants. Most of these informants were in all likelihood bilingual inhabitants of the frontier zone, among them soldiers, traders and local chiefs serving in the Roman *auxilia*. Like all cultural mediators, they would rapidly have come to know the sort of answers that were expected for particular lines of questioning. But although they might have deceived, in practice many will have come to depend on their credibility as local experts.²⁰ Their testimony was, presumably, largely reliable. So too was that of Tacitus. Whatever rhetorical aims he may have had – and I take for granted that the *Germania* was politically topical and morally engaged, without entering into the debate on the precise details of that topicality and engagement – his purposes will have depended on maintaining the verisimilitude of his representation. Germany was, after all, well known to many Romans, from military service in the Rhineland where between a third and a quarter of all military posts were held. Some encounters between Romans and Germans even took place in Rome and Italy: Augustus and the Julio-Claudian emperors kept a German bodyguard; German envoys occasionally visited the city and wondered at its marvels, and a handful of German chiefs lived in exile in Italy, hoping for the moment when it might suit the Caesars to restore them to power.²¹

Germany was familiar to even more Romans from their reading. Caesar's account at least was well known. Germans also featured in many other texts, notably the (lost) *German Wars* of the Elder Pliny and the same author's *Historia Naturalis*.²² The resemblances between pre-Tacitean textualizations of Germany and his own Germans strongly suggest that they had already acquired a fixed value. Germans partook of many qualities ascribed to all northern barbarians; that is, they were large, ferocious savages who were in some ways the defining opposite of the civilizations of the Mediterranean world, 'eaters of flesh, drinkers of milk'.²³ Like Herodotus' Scythians, the great prototype for such representations, they were unstable, labile, and unpredictable.²⁴ With no cities or fields to tie them down, no institutions or laws to bind

and define them, they were held to resemble the marshy wildernesses they inhabited in their fluidity, and in their lack of determinedness. Unlike some inhabitants of the edges of the world, however, they were wholly human.²⁵ Indeed, the last lines of the *Germania* fix the limit of Tacitus' account precisely on the border of the mythical, where the Hellusii and Oxionae are the first of the animal-human hybrids that were (equally familiar) inhabitants of the edges of the earth (46.4).²⁶

Tacitus does Germans beautifully, both here and again in the *Historiae* and in the opening books of the *Annales*. The decision to write about a people familiar to his reader must have been a deliberate one. Tacitus might, after all, have written of a wholly imaginary place like Atlantis or the land of the Antipodes, or of somewhere less well known by his peers, such as Taprobane or Ultima Thule. Germany offered a familiar kind of 'otherness' and also an ethnographic complexity that might be more richly exploited than more stereotyped realms of the imagination. The Germans were a fixed value, even if that value was a certain lack of fixity. I have deliberately emphasized terms such as 'value' and 'currency' to make clear that I am not concerned with establishing 'what the (all?, some?) Romans thought' nor with '*Das Germanenbild der Römer*'. That said, the values assigned to terms such as 'Germans' were conventional. They also tended to be interdependent with the values assigned to other peoples. 'Germans' were one sign in a system that also included 'Gauls', 'Britons', 'Indians' and 'Ethiopians' as well as the special operator 'Romans', special in that it was often an implicit point of comparison, a notionally normative centre, or a term concealed in the first person plural. That symbol system was not a fixed map of the world, but more like a set of counters that could be deployed in cultural play. We are very familiar with some of the most common moves in this game, such as 'Germans exemplify virtues (or vices) absent in Rome,' which might be elaborated as 'We used to be like Germans before we learned to be civilized' or 'We used to be virtuous when we were like Germans' and was an implicit reversal of 'Our superior civilization makes us more virtuous than the Germans.' The reality of Germany meant the game could be played in a more serious mode than if it simply concerned one or another Utopia. 'The Germans are barbarians and we will civilize them' or 'We used to civilize barbarians before we had emperors' or even 'We have not been ourselves (Romans) since we had emperors' and so on. By terming this 'play', I do not mean to imply that the stakes were low, or that the issues did not matter to the players. It derived from the rhetorical culture in which all male members of the Roman elite were brought up: Tacitus and his presumed readers were adepts at such games. That feature presumably forms one part of the popularity of ethnographic writing in antiquity, along with the fascination with others and difference generated by the travel and foreign service they undertook, and by encounters in the cosmopolitan world of the Roman Empire.²⁷ My question is how the gods of the Germans, and the rituals through which they worshipped them, were involved in this play.

The Germans in general: *Germania* 1–27

The plan of the *Germania* is well known. The text follows a familiar ekphrastic pattern according to which a global description of the whole is provided, and then followed by a more detailed narration of its constituent parts.²⁸ The opening is very Caesarian in that it establishes the Germans in a space marked out by natural boundaries – the Rhine and the Danube, mountain ranges and the Ocean – and as a people distinct from Gauls and Raetians, Dacians and Sarmatians. Successive chapters bolster their integrity as a people ‘like only to themselves’ (4.1),²⁹ and offer a generalizing account of German customs. The division between this first part of the text and the tribe-by-tribe survey that occupies the second part is clearly signalled (27.1).³⁰ From this point the text is organized as a *periegesis*, beginning at the Roman frontier and proceeding further and further to the north and east. Tacitus leads the reader deep into Germany, moving from the known to the unknowable, until together they reach the point where truth and fiction can no longer be distinguished. Here Tacitus abandons the reader *in medio*. The anti-closural move is an abrupt one.

Religious matters occur throughout the *Germania*. My account will more or less follow the sequence of their exposition. Right at the start (2), the reader is told how Germans sing in their songs of Tuisto, a god born from the earth and the father of Mannus who was the founder of their races, the ultimate *Stammvater* whose sons gave their names to the major divisions of the German people. The testimony of these songs is immediately impugned: several versions exist, each with different list of sons; and besides, there are also legends about Hercules and Ulysses. Tacitus affects to defer judgement. But he immediately follows this up with his own opinion, that the Germans have no connection via kinship or migration with any other people. They are thus firmly placed outside that network of kinship and genealogy and migration which in many ethnographic texts serves to connect different peoples.³¹

The *Germania* is not an innocent ethnography, if such things exist. Already we can observe Tacitus engaging in a game of the kind I outlined above. His procedure here is to offer up native views, affect ignorance ... and then suddenly produce his own conclusion. Readers have been offered a series of tempting alternatives of a conventional kind. That technique, of offering a series of possible answers to an antiquarian enquiry and then withholding judgement, is familiar enough.³² But in this case, Tacitus is only playing at withholding judgement. If the reader has been persuaded by any of these genealogies to believe that the natives know best, he has been caught out. Both the ancient lays of the Germans and the myths of Hercules and Odysseus are unreliable. Tacitus’ knowledge of the German present marks those pasts as fictional. This is how the game is to be played. Tacitus pursues his advantage. The Germans are like nothing you have ever seen; their land is uniquely wild and inhospitable. They are nothing like us, and care nothing for the precious metals that obsess us. Now the connections made between topics are deceptively casual. The discussion of metals leads into weapons and the ferocity of the Germans. Discussion of their wars leads to their warlike women, who are revealed to be the powerhouse behind the warriors, praising them, binding their wounds, bringing them sustenance and encouragement. German women have given armies

the courage to resist defeat, and the most valued hostages are German noblewomen. And so to female prophets:

They even believe that there resides in women some holy and prophetic force, and they always take heed of their advice and never neglect what they answer. We have seen how, in the time of the Deified Vespasian, Veleda was for a long time treated by many of them as a figure of great power. They also once venerated Albruna and many others, but not out of flattery and not declaring them goddesses (8.2).³³

At the mention of Veleda, first person testimony intrudes and the generic present tenses are interrupted by perfect tenses. As will happen more frequently in the second half of the *Germania*,³⁴ history threatens to rupture the ethnographic present. Here this draws attention to Tacitus' juxtaposition of how the Germans revere their priestesses, without *adulatio* or making them gods, and the way Romans treat their emperors and empresses. The game of othering the Germans suddenly seems more complicated. The Germans are still contrasted to a Roman norm, but the moral polarity has switched from characterizing them as fierce but inconstant warriors and a society where women dominate their menfolk, to presenting them favourably in relation to contemporary Roman practice. Not only are Romans convicted of *adulatio*, but the historical novelty of emperor worship is contrasted with the Germans' traditional honouring of their prophetesses. Even the date-check 'sub divo Vespasiano' provides a gratuitous allusion to the imperial cult.

Tacitus' characterization of the gods and rituals of the Germans follows in Chapters 9 and 10. It is a complex account, full of Caesarian echoes, but much is new:

Of all the gods they worship Mercury above all, to whom they even think it right on certain days to offer human sacrifices. Hercules and Mars they appease with conventional victims. A part of the Suebi also sacrifices to Isis. I have not been able to verify the cause and origin of this foreign ritual, but the fact that the image itself, made in the form of a boat, shows this cult has been imported. Otherwise they consider from the greatness of the gods that they should not be confined within buildings nor portrayed as if they resembled human beings in appearance. They dedicate woods and groves, and they give the names of the gods to that secret thing which they behold only with reverence (9).³⁵

This is a tantalizing passage, not just because we would like to know more, but because Tacitus constantly brings German and Roman religion into a relation of proximity only to suddenly signal their difference. Signs of similarity include the names of the gods – Mercury, Hercules, Mars and Isis – and also the religious language deployed – *hostiis litare fas ... religionem ... reverentia*. That sacrifices are organized *certis diebus* and that different gods received different victims sounds very Roman.³⁶ Yet human victims being *fas* is a blatant sign of difference, as is the Germans' disdain for images. As for Isis worship among the Suebi, Tacitus treats it with incredulity and bewilderment. Yet if Mercury and Hercules do not arouse comment, why should Isis?

The next chapter is devoted to divination. Tacitus claims that the Germans are passionate about taking the auspices, and goes on to describe a method for casting lots by seeing how a bundle of freshly cut twigs fall, and the role played by civic

priests and heads of household in interpreting the patterns made. The Germans (like the Romans) divine from the cries and flight of birds. But unlike any other people, they also practice divination from the movements and noises made by sacred white horses. The final form of divination described (Chapter 10) is that given by single combats between a captive enemy and one of their own warriors, a bloody ritual ending in death which returns the reader to the ancient stereotypes of the barbarian.³⁷ Once again there is a confusing interplay of sameness and difference. Recognizable to a Roman reader are the *auspicia* themselves and the importance placed on them; the parallel between the public actions of the *sacerdos civitatis* and the private action of the *paterfamilias*; the limits of the repeatability of divination; and the consultation of birds. But this is countered by the repetition of the *nemora* and *luci* with which Chapter 9 ended; by horse-divination; and by the *hinntusque ac fremitus* which accompanies the ultimate savage augury.

Throughout these alternating familiarizations and alienations of the Germans, Tacitus seems to toy with the reader. What kind of relation are we to imagine between Roman and German on the basis of their gods and their rituals? Are they surprisingly like us, or horribly different? No very obvious conclusion is suggested. The *Germania* could have been a work that claimed that fundamental similarities lay behind the apparent differences, or indeed one that demonstrated that the apparent resemblances between some gods and some rituals marked fundamental contrasts. But instead Tacitus keeps the reader guessing as to which emphasis will eventually dominate. Should we imagine a deliberate design to force the reader to decide, and by settling on an appraisal of the Germans come to some judgement on Roman society? Or is this a more playful exercise, delighting the reader with rapid shifts in tone and position, the counterpart of a piece of virtuoso display oratory? Like Tacitus, I choose for the moment to defer judgement.

It is only fair to point out that none of these moves are confined to Tacitus' discussions of religious matters. Similar moves can be observed when other German institutions are surveyed in the first part of the *Germania*, including political life, the family, sexual *mores* and kinship. Rituals perhaps offered special opportunities for exoticism, such as the white horses wandering where they will be unguided by human hand, and the slaughter of human victims. Yet the possibility of translation is constantly suggested by the use of familiar names for most of the gods mentioned in this first section, and by the use of Latin ritual terminology to denote priests (*sacerdotes*) and divination (*auspicia*).

The Germans, tribe by tribe: *Germania* 27–46

The second half of the *Germania* not only signals a move from a generalizing to a differentiating ethnographic gaze, but also marks a temporary limit to the monograph's insistent achronicity.

So much we have learned about the origins and customs of all the Germans: now I will set out the institutions and rituals of individual peoples, how they differ from

each other in this respect, and also which tribes have migrated out of Germany into Gaul (27.2).³⁸

The monograph opened with Tacitus rejecting legends of migration and proceeded to represent the timeless nature of the Germans. Now history is reintroduced into the mix alongside diversity. For the reader, the frequent references to events in Romano-German relations, along with the periegetical organization, generates a sense of narrative. As if to emphasize this shift of expository gear, we are treated to the first (and only) citation in the *Germania*, and it is a significant one:

The deified Caesar, the greatest of authorities, tells us that once upon a time the Gauls were far stronger than today, and for this reason it is believable that the Gauls even crossed over into Germany (28).³⁹

The allusion is to a passage that occurs in the middle of Caesar's 'ethnographic digression' on the Germans in book six of the *Gallic War*.⁴⁰ The compressed account of migrations presented in Chapter 28 mentions several tribes that had been major players in Caesar's commentaries, beginning appropriately with the Helvetii. Tacitus returns, too, in passing to the unreliability of native traditions, in this case the German ancestry asserted by the Treveri and Nervi. The chapter culminates with the Roman resettlement of the Ubii and their transformation into colonists and Agrippinenses.

For a while, Rome and the Romans will be much more present in the text. Indeed the geographical ordering principle fragments a continuous narrative of Rome's German wars. The effect resembles the scattered historical notices contained in Strabo's *Geography* and in the periegetic sections of Mela, Pliny or Solinus. Ethnographic 'digressions' when they occur in historical writing are, like other kinds of *ekphrasis*, often regarded as a form of narrative retardation. But in the *Germania* the relationship is reversed: achronicity and the ethnographic present have been established as the norm, and history and narrative are the intruders. So Chapter 29 launches into an account of the Batavii which recounts how they have once been part of the Chatti, the civil war that had led to their migration, the special status they had found in the Roman Empire as a mark of the persistence of their ancient prestige and then the similar situation of the Mattiaci 'beyond the former limits of the empire' (29).⁴¹ A further variation on the theme is offered by the recent Roman settlement of the Agri Decumates. But the account of the Chatti and of their neighbours interrupts the flow. History again muscles in with the story of 60,000 Bructeri annihilated by other Germans, but then the ethnographic focus moves north to the Frisii, and so on. This section comes to a climax when a single chapter (37) summarizes wars between Romans and Germans to which Pliny the Elder had devoted no fewer than 20 books. From the Cimbric invasion to Trajan's second consulship, Tacitus calculates a period of 220 years. 'So long the conquest of Germany is taking.' It is clear that the narrative, which in the *Germania* is frustrated by geography and ethnography, is the story of Roman conquest.

This historicized ethnography is a very different narrative terrain for religious commentary. In fact, nothing is said of the indigenous cults or gods of the peoples who are described in Chapters 29–37, the fierce Chatti and the Tencteri and Usipi,

the Chamavii and Angrivari, the Dulgubini and the Chasuarii or the Frisii, nor of the Cherusci and the Cimbri. There is no obvious reason why religious matters should have been suppressed. Other ethnographic peculiarities are noted, such as the habit of Chattan warriors of not cutting their hair before each kills his first enemy (Chapter 31.1), and the horsemanship of the Tencterii (Chapter 32). Nor is it any answer to say religious affairs have been dealt with in the generalizing section of the *Germania*, for they recur in the ethnography of Suebic tribes with which the monograph concludes. Finally, there were certainly things Tacitus *might* have mentioned, such as the Cheruscan sacrifice of Roman prisoners captured in the Varian disaster of AD 9, events he would allude to graphically in the *Annales*.⁴² Equally, the brief appearance of the Cimbri might have provided an occasion for discussion of the sacred gold of the lakes of Tolosa, connected by other writers with the plundering of Delphi by the Gauls.⁴³ But these opportunities are not taken. Tacitus has deliberately chosen *not* to foreground Germanic rituals and German gods in his accounts of those peoples who bordered the Roman Empire.

There is, however, an undercurrent of religious language in these chapters. But it is used to different effect, evoking the religious ideologies of Roman imperialism. One of the possible explanations offered in Chapter 33 for the slaughter of the Bructeri by other German tribes is 'the favour showed to us by the gods'. The chapter closes with the pious wish that discord among Rome's enemies may continue 'for as long as our imperial destiny urges us forward' (33.2).⁴⁴ Perhaps surprisingly, given his earlier comments on *adulatio* and the imperial cult, the account of Roman naval explorations of the Ocean in Chapter 34, ends with a parallel between the expeditions of Drusus Germanicus and of Hercules.

Drusus Germanicus did not lack courage, but Ocean blocked his enquiries just as it did those of Hercules. No-one has made the attempt since then. About the deeds of the gods it seems more devout and reverential to believe than to know for sure (34.2).⁴⁵

The final part of the *Germania* (Chapter 38ff.) takes us beyond the lands of Rome's regular enemies into a vaster, stranger world, one in which the gods and their rites will once again become prominent in the descriptions of German tribes. This was the world of the Suebi, a super-tribe the many subsidiary peoples of which will occupy almost the entire remainder of the monograph until its very last chapter (38).⁴⁶ It was a region almost unknown to Rome, and almost untouched by Roman arms, and most of it was some way beyond the frontier. What Tacitus knew of this region must have been reconstructed almost entirely from hearsay, whether gathered himself or via the medium of earlier ethnographic writing now lost. But there were many possible sources: among them were soldiers who had taken part in occasional expeditions in the continental interior; envoys sent to German tribes;⁴⁷ Latin speaking Germans within the empire; and figures like the Roman knight sent north from Carnuntum in Nero's reign to collect amber from the shores of the Baltic.⁴⁸ From this point on until the end of the *Germania*, tribes will be characterized not by their brief appearances in Roman history, but by their ethnographic peculiarities. Rituals and the gods – although absent from the descriptions of individual tribes in

Chapters 27–37 – will form an important part of these characterizations. First into sight are the Semnones:

The Semnones say that they are the oldest and most distinguished of the Suebi. Their faith in their antiquity is confirmed by ritual matters. For at a fixed time, all peoples of the same blood come together, through embassies to a forest hallowed by ancient auguries and an ancient dread, and when they have performed a public human sacrifice they celebrate the ghastly origins of their barbarous rites. And there are other signs of respect shown to this grove. No man may enter it unless bound in chains, as a lesser being acknowledging the power of the deity over him. If he accidentally falls over, he is not permitted to get up and rise, but much roll out across the ground. On this place all their *superstitio* is focused, as if the origin of their race is to be found on that spot, and there the god who rules all things, everything else being subordinate and obedient to him. The fortune of the Semnones adds authority to all this, for they inhabit a hundred districts and from this great mass of population believe themselves to be the chief people of the Suebi (39.1-2).⁴⁹

There are a few obvious similarities with the manner in which Tacitus characterized German religion in general in Chapters 9 and 10. The language deployed – *religione, auguriis, sacra, reverentia, numinis* – invites the reader to think of the cults of the Semnones in familiar terms. So, too, perhaps do the taboos surrounding the sacred grove. Certainly a modern reader familiar with Roman ritual might think of the elaborate *piacula* performed by the Arvales whenever works had been performed in *their* sacred grove.⁵⁰ Then there is the link asserted between the sacred place, the rituals that take place there, and their myths of origin. *Eoque ... inde ... ibi*. This is the first fixed geographical point mentioned in Germania, the first departure from the stereotype of fluid, moving peoples, who occupy spaces not places. How very Roman it is – so it would seem – to link myth to place via ritual! And then again there is the answering, contrapuntal defamiliarization. Human sacrifice is presented in all its barbaric horror: *caesoque publice homine celebrant barbari ritus horrenda primordia*. And their beliefs are ridiculed as *superstitio* and recounted as if (*tamquam*) they were true. Even so, the Semnones' belief that they are the oldest and most distinguished of the Suebi seems to be accepted by the surrounding peoples. These Germans seem to have a mirror image of Roman religion, one that sets them at the centre of the world and superior to all other peoples, with the difference that their myths are false and their cult is mere *superstitio*⁵¹. The parallel opens up the possibility for a familiar play on the part of the reader: how do we know it is the Germans, rather than ourselves, who are wrong about this?⁵²

Chapter 40 rapidly introduces eight more Suebian tribes:

There is nothing remarkable about these individual peoples except that they share a cult of Nerthus, that is of Mother Earth, and believe she gets involved in the affairs of mankind and wanders about among the tribes. There is on an island in the Ocean a sacred grove. It is said that on it there is a wagon, covered with drapes, which only one priest is allowed to touch. He divines when the goddess is present

in her inner sanctum, and escorts her out with great reverence, drawn by heifers. Then there is a season of rejoicing and in any place where she chooses to come and be welcomed there are great festivals. No wars are begun and no one takes up weapons. All iron objects are shut away. Security and peace are only known in this period, and only then appreciated, until the priest returns the goddess, sated with the company of mortal men to her temple. Soon the wagon, the drapes and – if you believe it, the deity herself are washed in a secret lake. Slaves perform these rites, and are immediately drowned in the lake. For this reason there is a secret terror and a holy ignorance of those things which only those about to die may behold (40.3-4).⁵³

By contrast with the supreme god worshipped by the Semnones, the common deity of these peoples has a name, Nerthus, that is, Mother Earth. No reason for the identification is given. The peregrination of the goddess in her sacred wagon drawn by heifers, the sacred truce, the ban on iron, and the ritual bathing of Nerthus when she returned to her grove on the island in the midst of Ocean, and the drowning of the slaves, none of these particularly suggest Terra Mater. And we are now in the land of travellers' tales, as is indicated by the phrase *si velis credere*. How far are we invited to make our own minds up? Whether she is really bathed by slaves – not easy without a cult image – or whether there really was a goddess in the wagon? Is this another empty cult? This time – Tacitus tells the reader – you can decide for yourself.

The reader's own peregrinations among the Germans are now brought abruptly down to earth – or rather back from the Ocean to the Roman frontier – with accounts of the Suebian tribes that border Rhaetia and the other Danube provinces (Chapters 42–3). Now we are closer to home, each tribe is again characterized by its past and present relations with Rome, and the exotic ethnography is absent. But as soon as the narrative leads us back into the interior, we re-enter Darkest Europe. Beyond the mountains is the land of the Suebian Lugii, themselves divided into a mass of sub-tribes, one of which is the Nahanarvali:

Among the Nahanarvali a grove of ancient ritual is displayed. A priest clad in female clothing presides there, but the gods they speak of are, in Roman translation, Castor and Pollux. This is the force of the deity, but their name is the Alci. There are no images, no trace of foreign superstition, but they are brothers and are worshipped as young men (43.3).⁵⁴

This passage is the source of the famous and much discussed phrase *interpretatio romana*. When it comes to naming the gods, Tacitus' practice in the *Germania* seems at first inconsistent. Chapter 2 offers us the name of a god from whom all men are said to be descended. His name is Tuisto, and no Latin equivalent is offered. But chapter 9 offers us the information that Mercury, Hercules and Mars are worshipped. Nothing is said of their local names or characteristics, and the identification is not based on their appearance since they have no images.⁵⁵ The same chapter claims that some of the Suebi worship Isis too. (There is no indication in the account of the Suebi as to which tribe this is.) Then there is a god of the Semnones, the supreme god inhabiting the sacred grove, who is given neither a German nor a Latin name. Then there is

Nerthus, translated as Terra Mater. Finally we have the Alci, translated as Castor and Pollux. Like Isis, there is no sign that they have come from elsewhere, yet Tacitus asks this question only of them and of her.

Knowing about other peoples' gods was notoriously difficult. Classical identifications were often made on iconographic grounds, something the relatively stable attributes of Greek deities made relatively easy.⁵⁶ This strategy was clearly not possible; indeed the absence of an image perhaps made it possible to believe that no god was really there at all. Why else was the story of slaves bathing a goddess especially incredible? Nor were the rituals particularly helpful. Nerthus behaves in a very idiosyncratic mode for Terra Mater, and the transvestite priest of the Alci hardly connotes the Dioscuri. How did Tacitus discern the *vis numinis*? That the Alci were brothers provided one clue; that Isis was represented as a *liburna* was another, given her connection with the sailing season. Yet in both cases their recognizability arouses the suspicion that they are not German at all. Were other gods so alien that no equivalent was suggested? Was Tuisto, perhaps, or the god of the Semnones, more or less untranslatable?

Tacitus represents himself as a careful investigator of these phenomena, one who notes and signals the limits of what is knowable, and of the things he is prepared to believe. This is, of course, a trope of ethnographic discourse when it reaches the limits of the known world. The further we penetrate into Germany, the more the reader has to make up his or her own mind. The final religious notice in the *Germania* refers to the distant Aestii who share the rituals and customs of the Suebi but speak a language closer to that of Britain:

They worship the mother of the gods. As a sign of their belief they were images of boars. This sign is more powerful than weapons in ensuring the safety of any worshipper of the goddess, even among his enemies (45.2).⁵⁷

Once again we have the bold statement that they worship the Mother of the Gods. But her cult is unrecognizable: not only are their *ritus* said to be like those of the Sequani, but the totemic boar images that convey sacrosanctity among enemies have no parallel in Roman religion. Unlike Nerthus/Terra Mater, we do not learn her name. A very clear geography of cult seems to have appeared, one that located exotic cults, cruel rituals and uncertainty about their meaning at the furthest limits of Germany. But in fact the reverse is true. Tacitus has engineered strangeness by the specific selection of his religious notices and the way he has chosen to present them. The further Germans, the unconquered regions of Germany, are not the Other: they have *been* othered, and rituals have provided a powerful means of achieving this end.

The uses of ritual

Looking at the magnificent sun chariot displayed in the galleries of the National Museum in Copenhagen, alongside great strings of amber and the bodies of sacrificial victims pressed into bogs, or contemplating ritual deposits in lakes and on moors across northern Europe from Fiskerton in Lincolnshire to Gudme on Funen and Oberdorla in Thuringia, it is difficult not to recognize elements of some of the more

distinctive cults described in the *Germania*. Wagons, human sacrifices and ritual treatment of weapons were common elements in a cultic tradition that was shared by many peoples of Iron Age Europe.⁵⁸ Not everything that Tacitus relates about the rituals of the Germans can be exactly paralleled. But little, if any of it, is unbelievable against this background. This should not be a surprise. By the early second century AD, a great deal of information was available about northern Europe, both in books and in the experience and reportage of individuals, both Germans and Romans. There was certainly no need to fictionalize German ritual, whether by the conventional devices of *inventio* or by recycling tropes from other northern peoples.

All the same, it should be clear by now that the *Germania* is a poor guide to the religious ethnography of the Romans' northern neighbours. Selection and presentation have, in all parts of the work, subordinated discussions of religious matters to Tacitus' wider aims. Tacitus is artful and beguiling, but not especially original in the way in which he incorporated religious matters into his ethnographic writing. Religion was, I have argued, an optional element of ethnographic discourse and, unlike diet or ferocity, its content was already determined by prevalent paradigms of human geography. We can see Tacitus exploiting this freedom when it comes to religious matters. But we should not expect ethnography of religion, and we do not find one.

Notices of religion serve a number of specific purposes in the *Germania*. At first they differentiate Germans from Romans (as Caesar had used them to differentiate Germans from Gauls) and they add colour to the games of sameness and difference with which the first part of the *Germania* is concerned, inviting readers to measure themselves against alternative ideals, identities and historical destinies. On one occasion – the reference to Roman *adulatio* – German customs give Tacitus a chance to make a point about what he sees as an undesirable novelty in Roman cult. Yet mostly religious rites are mixed with other customs throughout, and treated in much the same way. As the *Germania* progresses, they help elaborate a geography of strangeness, in which distance from the frontier correlates with an increasing sense of the bizarre and the mysterious, implicitly constructing Rome as normal and well known. Close to the frontier, religious language alludes to the divine mandate for Roman world dominion, a commonplace of Tacitus' day; conversely, these Germans are given no cult of their own. Further away, among the Suebi, beyond the mountains, and on the shores and islands of the Ocean, religion is a powerful means of indicating the moral distance between Germany and Rome. Invisible deities are worshipped with strange and horrific rites in sacred groves. Exotic deities are female and/or invisible, and the male priests are bland compared with the respect paid to their prophetesses. The gods of the Germans are first encountered in Roman guise, but the possibility of translation falters and breaks down as we approach the edges of the world. Religion can signal the horrific and the alien, the cruel and the repulsive. All this is part of a standard dehumanization of 'barbarians'. Yet discussion of the ancient rituals of the Germans is also used to shift the pace of the exposition, into an ethnographic present underwritten by remote antiquity. Allusions to Rome's fates and fortune and the expedition of Drusus reminds us that since Virgil (and maybe long before⁵⁹), Roman imperialism has had a religious narrative too, even if in Germany it has stalled, at least for the moment.

Notes

- 1 Earlier versions of this chapter were presented to audiences at Erfurt and Leiden. Those present on those occasions will know how very much it has been improved by their comments, for all of which I am very grateful. I am also grateful to the editors for comments on an earlier draft. All references in the notes are to the *Germania* unless otherwise noted.
- 2 The phrase from a definition of modern anthropology offered by Leach (1982).
- 3 On this issue, see further Woolf (2011: 13–17).
- 4 On which, see now Gruen (2011).
- 5 Those schemas and their deployment are the subject of Woolf (2011, ch. 2).
- 6 Masuzawa (2005).
- 7 Gruzinski and Rouveret (1976); Sheehan (1980); Bentley (1993); Pocock (2005: 157–80); Pagden (1982).
- 8 Smith (1998). For the relationship of this discourse with reflections on antiquity, see Stroumsa (2002).
- 9 Pagden (1993: 117–40).
- 10 This section owes a great deal to the sophisticated discussion of Ando (2008: 43–58).
- 11 Bonnet (1988); Jourdain-Annequin (1989); Malkin (2005).
- 12 Bowersock (1990).
- 13 Apuleius *Metamorphoses* 11.47. On which, see Versnel (1990). See also Lucian *On the Syrian Goddess* 31–32 on Atargatis/Hera and her relationship to other goddesses.
- 14 Wissowa (1916–19). On which, see the comments of Ando (2008: 44–6).
- 15 Mellor (1995); Krebs (2005); Rives (1999, 66–74).
- 16 Norden (1920); Lund (1990); Rives (1999).
- 17 Foundational texts for such an approach include Clifford and Marcus (1986); Comaroff and Comaroff (1992).
- 18 O'Gorman (1993).
- 19 A point clearly stated by Gruen (2011: 159–78).
- 20 Gudeman (1900); Woolf (2009).
- 21 For the German bodyguards, see Speidel (1984). Tacitus' *Annales* 13.54 tells the anecdote of a German embassy sight-seeing at the Theatre of Pompey. On German exiles resident in Italy, see Rives (1999: 29–30).
- 22 Discussion in Murphy (2004: ch. 5).
- 23 Krebs (2011); Shaw (1982).
- 24 Krebs (2006).
- 25 Contrast the grotesques and hybrids gathered from Pliny in Evans (1999). More generally Romm (1992: 67–81).
- 26 *cetera iam fabulosa: Hellusios et Oxionas ora hominum voltusque, corpora atque artus ferarum gerere: quod ego ut incompetum in medio relinquam.*
- 27 For the modern counterpart, see Clifford (1999); Thomas (1994).
- 28 For the pattern, Fowler (1991).
- 29 *ipse eorum opinionibus accedo, qui Germaniae populos nullis aliis aliarum nationum conubiis infectos propriam et sinceram et tantum sui similem gentem exstitisse arbitrantur.*
- 30 *haec in commune de omnium Germanorum origine ac moribus accepimus: nunc singularum gentium instituta ritusque, quatenus differant, quae nationes e Germania in Gallias commigraverint, expediam.*

- 31 Bickermann (1952).
- 32 On Plutarch's questions, see Preston (2001). On Latin parallels, especially in relation to Ovid's *Fasti*, see Beard (1987). For the phenomenon in ancient historiography, see Marincola (1997: 280–86).
- 33 inesse quin etiam sanctum aliquid et providum putant, nec aut consilia earum aspernantur aut responsa neglegunt. vidimus sub divo Vespasiano Veledam diu apud plerosque numinis loco habitam; sed et olim Albrunam et compluris alias venerati sunt, non adulatione nec tamquam facerent deas.
- 34 See below on *Germania* 28–9, 33–4 and especially 37.
- 35 deorum maxime Mercurium colunt, cui certis diebus humanis quoque hostiis litare fas habent. Herculem et Martem concessis animalibus placant. pars Sueborum et Isidi sacrificat: unde causa et origo peregrino sacro, parum comperi, nisi quod signum ipsum in modum liburnae figuratum docet advectam religionem. ceterum nec cohibere parietibus deos neque in ullam humani oris speciem adsimulare ex magnitudine caelestium arbitrantur: lucos ac nemora consecrant deorumque nominibus appellunt secretum illud, quod sola reverentia vident.
- 36 On the grammar of sacrifices, see Scheid (1999).
- 37 auspicia sortesque ut qui maxime observant: 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, sublatis secundum impressam ante notam interpretatur. si prohibuerunt, nulla de eadem re in eundem diem consultatio; sin permissum, auspicioium adhuc fides exigitur. et illud quidem etiam hic notum, avium voces volatusque interrogare; proprium gentis equorum quoque praesagia ac monitus experiri. Publice aluntur isdem nemoribus ac lucis, candidi et nullo mortali opere contacti; quos pressos sacro curru sacerdos ac rex vel princeps civitatis comitantur hinnitusque ac fremitus observant. Nec ulli auspicio maior fides, non solum apud plebem, sed apud proceres, apud sacerdotes; se enim ministros deorum, illos conscios putant. est et alia observatio auspicioium, qua gravium bellorum eventus explorant. eius gentis, cum qua bellum est, captivum quoquo modo interceptum cum electo popularium suorum, patrii quemque armis, committunt: victoria huius vel illius pro praeiudicio accipitur.
- 38 haec in commune de omnium Germanorum origine ac moribus accepimus: nunc singularum gentium instituta ritusque, quatenus differant, quae nationes e Germania in Gallias commigraverint, expediam.
- 39 validiores olim Gallorum res fuisse summus auctorum divus Iulius tradit; eoque credibile est etiam Gallos in Germaniam transgressos.
- 40 Caesar *BG* 6.24.1: ac fuit antea tempus cum Germanos Galli virtute superarent, ulto bella inferrent, propter hominum multitudinem agrisque inopiam trans Rhenum colonias mitterent.
- 41 manet honos et antiquae societatis insigne; nam nec tributis contemnuntur nec publicanus atterit; exempti oneribus et conlationibus et tantum in usum proeliorum sepositi, velut tela atque arma, bellis reservantur. On the history of the Batavii, see now Roymans (2004).
- 42 Tacitus *Annales* 1.61 recounting Germanicus' visit and the sight of 'lucis propinquis barbarae arae, apud quas tribunos ac primorum ordinum centuriones mactaverant'.
- 43 Dyson (1970); Woolf (2011: 74–8).
- 44 maneat, quaeso, duretque gentibus, si non amor nostri, at certe odium sui, quando

- urgentibus imperii fatis nihil iam praestare fortuna maius potest quam hostium discordiam.
- 45 nec defuit audentia Druso Germanico, sed obstitit Oceanus in se simul atque in Herculem inquiri. mox nemo temptavit, sanctiusque ac reverentius visum de actis deorum credere quam scire.
- 46 nunc de Suebis dicendum est, quorum non una, ut Chattorum Tencterorumve, gens; maiorem enim Germaniae partem obtinent, propriis adhuc nationibus nominibusque discreti, quamquam in commune Suebi vocentur.
- 47 Most accounts of diplomacy relate the reception of foreign embassies by the emperor, but some missions were occasionally sent. One to the Cotini is attested during the Marcomannic Wars by Dio 71.12.3, on which see Millar (1982: 5–6).
- 48 Pliny NH 37.45: Sexcentis millibus passuum fere a Carnunto Pannoniae abesse litus id Germaniae, ex quo invehitur, percognitum nuper, vivitque eques R. ad id comparandum missus ab Iuliano curante gladiatorium munus Neronis principis. qui et commercia ea et litora peragravit, tanta copia invecta, ut retia coercendis feris podium protegentia sucinis nodarentur, harena vero et libitina totusque unius diei apparatus in variatione pompae singulorum dierum esset e sucino. On this and similar expeditions, see Nicolet (1991: 85–94).
- 49 vetustissimos se nobilissimosque Sueborum Semnones memorant; fides antiquitatis religione firmatur. stato tempore in silvam auguriis patrum et prisca formidine sacram omnes eiusdem sanguinis populi legationibus coeunt caesoque publice homine celebrant barbari ritus horrenda primordia. est et alia luco reverentia: nemo nisi vinculo ligatus ingreditur, ut minor et potestatem numinis prae se ferens. si forte prolapsus est, attolli et insurgere haud licitum: per humum evolvuntur. eoque omnis superstitio respicit, tamquam inde initia gentis, ibi regnator omnium deus, cetera subiecta atque parentia. adicit auctoritatem fortuna Semnonum: centum pagi iis habitantur magnoque corpore efficitur ut se Sueborum caput credant.
- 50 Cf. Acta Arvalium for 19 May, AD 87 with Scheid (1998).
- 51 On which, see Gordon (2008); Beard, North and Price (1998: 215–22).
- 52 For the ideological value of the normalized view of the boundary between *religio* and *superstitio*, see Gordon (1990)
- 53 nec quicquam notabile in singulis, nisi quod in commune Nerthum, id est Terram matrem, colunt eamque intervenire rebus hominum, invehī populis arbitrantur. est in insula Oceani castum nemus, dicatumque in eo vehiculum, veste contactum; attingere uni sacerdoti concessum. is adesse penetrāli deam intellegit vectamque bubus feminis multa cum veneratione prosequitur. laeti tunc dies, festa loca, quaecumque adventu hospitioque dignatur. non bella ineunt, non arma sumunt; clausum omne ferrum; pax et quies tunc tantum nota, tunc tantum amata, donec idem sacerdos satiatam conversatione mortalium deam templo reddat. mox vehiculum et vestes et, si credere velis, numen ipsum secreto lacu abluitur. servi ministrant, quos statim idem lacus haurit. arcanus hinc terror sanctaque ignorantia, quid sit illud, quod tantum perituri vident.
- 54 apud Nahanarvalos antiquae religionis lucus ostenditur. praesidet sacerdos muliebri ornatu, sed deos interpretatione Romana Castorem Pollucemque memorant. ea vis numini, nomen Alcīs. nulla simulacra, nullum peregrinae superstitionis vestigium; ut fratres tamen, ut iuvenes venerantur.
- 55 Contrast the Caesarian model at BG 6.17 where both images and attributes are both adduced: deum maxime Mercurium colunt. huius sunt plurima simulacra: hunc omnium inventorem artium ferunt, hunc viarum atque itinerum ducem, hunc ad

- quaestus pecuniae mercaturasque habere vim maximam arbitrantur. post hunc Apollinem et Martem et Iovem et Minervam. de his eandem fere, quam reliquae gentes, habent opinionem: Apollinem morbos depellere, Minervam operum atque artificiorum initia tradere, Iovem imperium caelestium tenere, Martem bella regere.
- 56 Gordon (1979).
- 57 matrem deum venerantur. insigne superstitionis formas aprorum gestant: id pro armis omniumque tutela securum deae cultorem etiam inter hostis praestat.
- 58 Parker Pearson (2006). For a more general account, see Todd (1992: 104–21).
- 59 On religious understandings of Roman imperialism, see Brunt (1978: 163–7); North (1993).

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