

“A Fruit of his Studies in Ptolemy”: The *Geographike Hyphegesis* of Claudius Ptolemy in
Willibald Pirckheimer’s *Germaniae Explicatio*

As the aura of Tacitus has captured modern classicists and ancient historians for well over a century, so the aura of Claudius Ptolemy dominated geographical scholarship in the Renaissance. Ptolemy’s influence was acutely felt among an active and significant group of German Renaissance humanists, who cultivated an intense patriotism for their *patria*, Germania, and their ancestors, the Germani. Studies on classical reception among these patriotically inclined German humanists in the Renaissance, however, have long followed trends that have privileged the Roman imperial historian over the Alexandrian geographer (e.g. Hirstein, Krebs). Since Paul Joachimsen’s declaration that Tacitus had the greatest influence on German humanism save for Cicero (Joachimsen 1911, 698) to Ronny Kaiser’s forthcoming dissertation on humanist commentaries on Tacitus’ *Germania* (Kaiser, forthcoming), scholars have maintained that German patriotic humanism was Tacitus’ domain. Tacitus’ perceived primacy led Dieter Mertens to argue that late medieval German historiography as a whole underwent a “Tacitean paradigm shift,” due to the *Germania* (Mertens, 143). Tacitus’ perceived status in Renaissance scholarship must be relativized through studies in other ancient sources—of which there are currently none—and that the 2nd-century BCE Alexandrian geographer, Ptolemy, must be the priority.

This paper investigates one important contribution to the German patriotic humanists’ thorough dependency on Ptolemy: Willibald Pirckheimer’s *Germaniae Explicatio* (*ed. prin.* 1530). Pirckheimer was a humanist from Nuremberg, who was a leading force in geographical and Greek studies in the German intellectual community, who published an authoritative translation of the *Geographike Hyphegesis* in 1525. These studies greatly influenced his

Germania Explicatio, a slim geographical-historical investigation of ancient and sixteenth-century Germania, which is in essence a sixteenth-century adaptation of the ancient geographical text for his patriotic purposes. In the introduction to the *Germaniae Explicatio*, Pirckheimer explained that Ptolemy’s work and the maps printed with it were necessary “for understanding geography” (Pirckheimer 1530, a2v). He thereby expressed the fundamental importance of geography, especially through Ptolemy, for his audience and for understanding German history. I argue that Pirckheimer’s use of Ptolemy demonstrates that German humanist patriotism was thoroughly indebted to classical knowledge far beyond Tacitus’ *Germania*.

Niklas Holzberg and Paul Joachimsen (Holzberg, 271–273; Joachimsen 1910, 186–187) long ago identified the connection between the *Geographike Hyphegesis* and the *Explicatio Germaniae*, but neither went far beyond Joachimsen’s statement that the work was “a fruit of his studies in Ptolemy” (Joachimsen 1910, 186). In fact, close investigation reveals that the *Explicatio*’s structure and content was in fact entirely dependent on Ptolemy. Following the *Geographike Hyphegesis*, Pirckheimer divided Germania into regions and provided both a short description of each, followed by a list of locations found in them. However, instead of listing the locations’ coordinates, like Ptolemy, Pirckheimer provided each location’s ancient name and the corresponding modern name. These lists of cities and descriptions of regions are often simply copied and adapted versions of the structure and content of Ptolemy’s text, as, for example, his cities found in Raetia shows:

Pirckheimer:

Targetium – Stulingen
Bracodurum – Pfulendorff
Dacuina – Ehingen
Viana – Weysenhorn
Pheniana – Laubing
 (Pirckheimer 1530, a4v)

Ptolemy:

Bragodurum 30 46 ³/₄
Dracuina 30 ¹/₃ 46 ²/₃
Viana 31 46 ²/₃
Phæniana 31 ¹/₂ ¹/₄ 46 ¹/₂ ¹/₃
 (Ptolemy 1525, d4v)

The implications of Pirckheimer's reliance on Ptolemy are important and reflect two essential aspects of the Renaissance's intense cultivation of classical knowledge: geography's resurgence as a field of study and Ancient Greek's revival in Latin Europe. Pirckheimer's work, with the entwining of patriotism for Germania, classical geography, and Greek studies was very representative of German humanism as a whole. Tacitus' *Germania* was doubtlessly important, but studying the impact of Ptolemy begins balancing out the scholarly outlook on classical reception in humanist patriotism. It ultimately connects the patriotic movement with some of the most significant transformations in late medieval and early modern European intellectual life.

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