

Tacitus' Ethnographies: the Role of the Other  
in the *Germania*, the *Agricola* and *Histories* 5  
H. Paul Brown (Southern Illinois University)

This paper explores how, within his corpus as a whole, Tacitus uses ethnography as part of a complex set of oppositions as part of an ongoing critique of his Roman subject. Not known primarily as an ethnographer, Tacitus does offer three ethnographic tracts: the *Germania*, *Agricola* 10-13, and *Histories* 5.2-8. The scholarship on these passages has focused mainly on their usefulness for understanding the respective ancient cultures or on Tacitus' role within the greater picture of Greco-Roman ethnography and anti-Semitism (e.g., Isaac, 2004). These perspectives all find the importance of Tacitus' ethnography to be extrinsic to the rest of his body of work. Two exceptions are O'Gorman (1993) and Bloch (2003). In this paper I will suggest that Tacitus' *Iudaei* operate as one end of an axis of opposition, the other end of which is occupied by his *Germani* and *Britanni*. This axis then sits over against his Roman subject, largely absent from these three passages. This apposition sets up points of comparison, but never an explicit system of comparison. However, the repetition and contrast of related *topoi*, often identical, invite us to read them as if they operate as such a system.

Intermarriage affords an example of such an implicit and invited comparison. Tacitus' *Germani*, untainted by intermarriage (*nullis aliarum conubiis infectos*), are appropriate (*propria*) and clean (*sincera*) and similar only to themselves (*tantum sui similes*, *Ger* .4). On the other hand, his *Britanni* are a mixed group (*corporum uarii*) because of immigration (*traiecisse, occupasse*), and so mix timidity (*formido*) equally with bravery (*audacia*, *Agr*. 11). These differences of character are reflected in their different fates. *Germania* remains unconquered. *Britannia* was divided and so has been conquered (*Agr*. 12). Unity is a source of strength and safety; those who are mixed are weaker and conquerable. However, when Tacitus turns to describe the *Iudaei* the opposite seems to hold. The *Iudaei* are odd. Like the *Germani*, they refuse to intermarry, but for them isolation results not in purity, but profligacy (*inter se nihil illicitum*), an oddly incoherent claim (*Hist*. 5.5). Lacking a clear and coherent origin, they are driven into exile, where they rely only on themselves (*sibimet crederent*). This results in their inhabiting a bizarre land that Tacitus describes as burnt (*torrida*), tainted (*infici* again), corrupted (*corrumpi*) and inducing rot (*putrescere*, *Hist*. 5.7). And Tacitus himself has already written their own defeat (*famosae urbis supremum diem*, *Hist*. 5.2). The issue for Tacitus is not one of intermarriage or isolation (*vel sim.*) *per se*, but subjugation and freedom.

Tacitus invites us to build a picture through a comparison of such individual points. But this picture does not appear at first to be coherent. However, this incoherence begins to disappear when we cease to focus on these cultural specifics. A more cogent reading replaces it if Tacitus' *gentes* are allowed to be read as fantasies that reflect on an implicit Roman subject. Tacitus' Rome itself is not internally coherent. In this reading his *Germani* and *Britanni* reflect off a picture of a romanticized rustic Roman past, Like Livy's Cincinnatus. Tacitus' *Iudaei*, odd and with their complicated relation to the East—itsself having an complex relation to Rome—have no part in this fantasy simpler and freer times. Rather they obliquely invite visions servitude, and possible and problematic Roman futures. As Tacitus himself spells out often (*Ann*. 1, *Agr*. 1, *Hist*. 1-4, *et aliis*), his Rome has long been struggling with the issues of subjugation and freedom.

Tacitus' Ethnographies: the Role of the Other  
in the *Germania*, the *Agricola* and *Histories 5*  
H. Paul Brown (Southern Illinois University)

A handout will accompany this paper

Selected References

Isaac, B., 2004, *The Invention of Racism in Classical Antiquity*, Princeton University Press.

Bloch, R., 2003, *Antike Vorstellungen vom Judentum. Der Judenexkurs des Tacitus im Rahmen der griechisch-romischen Ethnographie*, F. Steiner.

O’Gorman, E., 1993, “No Place Like Rome: Identity and Difference in the *Germania* of Tacitus,” *Ramus* 22: pp. 135-54.