

Environmental Determinism and the Rationalization of Imperialism in Tacitus' *Germania*

Environmental Determinism, or the notion that human cultural and physical difference is influenced and, perhaps, caused by variations in climate and geography, was a key principle informing ancient ethnography. The theory is best known (and best explained) by the way Hippocrates in *Airs, Waters, and Places* uses natural law to criticize the habits, personal and political, of Scythians and Near Easterners; not only can he explain *why* these peoples differ from Greeks, but he can also state that the qualities he objects to are determined by nature, and thus cannot be remedied.

By the time of Tacitus wrote his *Germania*, the theory had become a fixed and often unconsciously invoked fixture in discussions of human variation. It is particularly prominent in Tacitus' discussion of the parts of Germany that he finds least appealing; the livestock, lack of agricultural activity (4-5), housing (16), and clothing (17). However, it also can be read in passages that celebrate German physical stature and strength (19-20), simplicity of diet (23), and fiscal policy (26); in fact, many German qualities that Tacitus implicitly or explicitly attributes to environmental influences are qualities that align with Roman nostalgic arguments for a return to simpler, more severe customs.

Clearly, and unlike Hippocrates, Tacitus is not using environmental explanations merely to explain and criticize outsiders. Rather, older trends in ethnographic theory are being repurposed for his own context. Tacitus is writing ethnography complicated by the expansionist political philosophy of his time, and also within a cultural environment that was torn between conservative and progressive approaches to family life and the concept of *virtus*. In his hands, Environmental Determinism becomes a tool that can be used to advocate for the inclusion (presumably by force) of Germany in the *Imperium*.

In this reading, Tacitus' *Germania* is written with an eye toward conquest. It uses environment as an argument for how Romans and Germans can mutually influence each other for the better; the Empire needs to add Germany to her borders as a chilly balance to the civilized malaise of the South. German severity sets an example to remedy the perceived ravages of civilized luxury on Roman society. Likewise the Germans' environmentally determined impatience for sustained work and lust for raiding other people's goods can be interpreted as a land in desperate need of Roman control; Romans, as agriculturalists, are ideally qualified to save Germany from itself. The environment of Germany, immutable as it is, then serves also as a control on the degree to which Germany and Italy can influence each other. It limits the degree to which Germans can become *too* much like Romans (and thus pose more of a danger by developing cohesive endurance on top of their climate-induced hardiness), and it also limits the degree to which Romans can be 'infected' with the most objectionable (and climate-dependent) qualities of the Germans.

Tacitus' use of Environmental Determinism, then, has a protean quality. Far from Hippocrates' straightforward use of the theory to condemn cultural others, Tacitus bends and shapes its logic to encourage a larger agenda; one that is, at its roots, expansionist and imperialist. It both flatters and castigates its reading audience in comparison to its subject matter, but always to an end that encourages Romans to return to their own severe (and martial) roots. And what better way to do so than to engage in a new war of conquest, thus adding chilly Northern balance to the liberalizing influence of the South and East.