

Who is Arminius?

A Handbook

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1. Who is Arminius and why do I care?

Who is this Arminius? He is firmly rooted in Roman history, yet he remains a mystery to us as inhabitants of the modern world. The historical figure Arminius is believed to have been born around 16 BCE to Segimer, the Chief of the German Cherusci tribe.¹ As the Romans began to explore Germany as an extension of the Empire, beginning under the leadership of Caesar,² they incorporated some noble German families into their ways, taking on guardianship of chieftains' sons and raising them in the Roman manner. Arminius and his younger brother, Flavus, both served in the Roman army, were given Roman-sounding names, and earned full Roman citizenship upon reaching manhood. Arminius even led his own auxiliary unit of Cherusci-Roman troops in various military efforts for the Romans. Arminius learned to speak Latin and attained equestrian status within Roman society.

We know the basics of the life of Arminius from the writings of ancient Roman historians, although there are many details which none of the historians are able to give, such as Arminius' given name before acquiring his Roman citizenship. For the most part, Arminius exists within the ancient literature purely in his role concerning the events at the Teutoburg Forest in 9 CE, to which I will return later. Most of our extant ancient sources were written in the 1st century CE, with the battle at Teutoburg being fresh in the minds of the Romans. I chose to focus mainly on Tacitus' interpretation of Arminius and the interactions between the Cherusci and the Romans.

¹ Velleius Paterculus 2.118.2

² Heather 2010: 3.

I chose to do this for a couple of reasons: the first concerns the time constraint on the scope of my project. Choosing one author to focus on allowed me to examine his work and life more closely, and to bring in other authors when appropriate with whom to support or contrast a point. Although Tacitus lived and wrote in the 2nd century CE, over a century after Teutoburg, the account in his *Annals* is one of the most interesting we have. His is the only extant account of Arminius which develops the character of Arminius as a person and as a German.³ Tacitus' earlier work, the *Germania*, was also key in choosing Tacitus as my focus. The ethnographic study of the Germanic territory and its tribes was especially helpful as a point of comparison in identifying Arminius' place within German society.

Tacitus also stands apart from the other authors in his portrayal of Arminius and the Germanic tribes. He portrays the Germanic people more positively within his writings than any of the other authors, who attributed treachery to Arminius and his kin, rather than the more honorable characteristics employed by Tacitus. As a counterpoint to Tacitus in his solidarity stands Arminius' contemporary, Velleius Paterculus, a Roman general who was stationed in Germany under the reigns of Augustus and Tiberius. Velleius' work stands apart from the other authors not in content, but in its temporal and spatial relevance to Arminius. Although nobody writing about him ever met Arminius (that we can confirm or disprove), Velleius is in the unique position of having experienced the German province firsthand. We have no reason to believe that he ever

³ Tacitus. *Annals* 1.59: "Arminius was driven mad by his wife's capture and by the subjugation of her unborn child. He flew around the Cherusci, demanding war against Segestes, war against Caesar." This is the first time in the historical record that an action is attributed to Arminius outside of leading the Battle of Teutoburg. He is here portrayed simply as a man, whose wife and unborn son have been snatched from him.

encountered Arminius while stationed in Germany, but his perspective is such that he would have at least been writing from a more informed position. I do not believe that this stance gives the account of Velleius Paterculus any more validity than any of the other authors, however, it is a significant point to take into consideration when looking at all the facts.

This brings me to the other side of my project. My original interest was to connect my studies of classical and German Literature, with the figure of Arminius (or Hermann, as he is later called) serving as the connective thread between the two eras and cultures. As a cultural icon, Arminius, in the guise of Hermann, has become semi-heroic, somewhat more than a man yet marginally less than a deity. At the outset, I expected to find a clear continuous lineage from the Arminius of Roman accounts of Teutoburg to the Hermann of modern Germany. I again focused on select works in the interest of the time span and breadth given to my project. I chose one early modern work by the humanist Ulrich von Hutten, which consists of a dialogue modeled after one of the 2nd century Greek writer Lucian's *Dialogues of the Dead*, with the addition of Arminius to the original plotline. I also chose an early 19th century drama by the Romantic writer Heinrich von Kleist by the name of *Die Hermannsschlacht*. Both works feature Arminius prominently as the leader of the Battle of the Teutoburg Forest, yet treat him very differently.

An obvious transformation had taken place our earliest account of Arminius, which we can date before 30 CE, and Kleist's Hermann in his 1808 drama. Using these two dates as brackets gave me at least 1,778 years of literary history to sift through. My other, ancillary objective was to track Arminius' name throughout the literary record.

My research, as far as my original objectives are concerned, was inconclusive. There is no direct line of materials that connects the Arminius of the ancient world to that of the modern. That being said, there was a pretty significant correlation found. Although the ancient sources exist in isolation from the German sources, the creation of the earliest of the modern German writings is due in large part to the rediscovery of Tacitus' manuscripts in the 14th century CE.⁴ Hutten's 16th century *Arminius* was one of the earliest modern pieces of literature featuring Arminius. Hutten's dialogue was classically derived, drawing on Tacitus and Velleius as a source for Arminius and Teutoburg, and Lucian for the form and content of his Underworld Dialogue. The rediscovery of Tacitus, and of classical Latin manuscripts as a whole during the 14th to 16th centuries prompted the rebirth of Arminius in Germany.

As for getting from "Arminius" to "Hermann," that line is less certain, although can also be speculated on. Hutten exclusively referred to our man as Arminius. By the 19th century, Arminius had become Hermann, yet Kleist did not exclusively call him Hermann in his drama. This partial transition signifies a shift in the role of Arminius/Hermann in German culture. A mere few decades after the completion of Kleist's *Hermannsschlacht*, another event demonstrates the growing significance of Arminius/Hermann within German society.

In 1841, construction began on a nearly 200 feet tall monument in what is today near Detmold, Germany.⁵ The Hermannsdenkmal sits on a craggy hilltop at the southernmost point of the Teutoburg Forest, a massive sandstone pedestal supporting an immense bronze figure, which is meant to portray a likeness of Arminius himself.

⁴ Reynolds and Wilson 1984: 107.

⁵ Benario 1956: 318.

Dressed in full Roman-style military regalia, the figure stands looking out from his elevated position, holding a sword straight up into the air. Along the blade of the sword read the words *DEUTSCHE EINIGKEIT MEINE STÄRKE / MEINE STÄRKE DEUTSCHLANDS MACHT*.⁶ This statement gives us insight into the function of Hermann in the modern German consciousness. In the 19th century, Germany was recovering from the Napoleonic Wars, and on the verge of the Franco-Prussian War, preventing the completion of the Hermannsdenkmal until 1875. As such, to the Germans of this era, Hermann stood as a symbol of German liberation and unification.

Tacitus called Arminius the *turbator Germaniae* as well as the *liberator haud dubie Germaniae* in his *Annals* in the 2nd century,⁷ and though he survives almost exclusively as a symbol of liberation and German independence in modern German history. He grew from a relatively minor character in Roman history to become a cultural icon and symbol of national pride, remaining relevant throughout 2,000 years of global history and change. Arminius encompasses the very spirit of what it means to be German, and that is what I sought to capture in my research.

⁶ “German unity [is] my strength / My strength [is] Germany’s power.”

⁷ Tac. *Annals* 1.55.2: “disturber of Germany”; *Ann.* 2.88.2: “without a doubt the liberator of Germany.”

2. Die Schlacht im Teutoburger Wald

According to our ancient sources, Arminius led a band of his tribesmen against Varus and his three legions of Roman troops in 9 CE. The time and place of the battle are two things that the historians agree on. The two leaders of the two sides are also agreed upon. Quintilius Varus was appointed the governor of the province of Germania, and was responsible for the wellbeing of three legions of Roman soldiers. Arminius is credited by all of the ancient sources as the leader of the German forces, as well as the instigator of the battle. Regardless of whether or not the Battle of Teutoburg was unexpected, an attack ought to have been foreseen, given the volatility of relations between the Germans and Romans and the experience of Varus.⁸

The Romans had become rooted in the Germanic northlands by the start of the first century CE.⁹ Serious relations began during Julius Caesar's campaigns in Gaul in the sixties BCE.¹⁰ The tribes in the western part of the Germanic territory, living directly east of the Rhine River, at times were a threat to Caesar's Gallic campaign, and he briefly engaged them in battle as they came to the aid of, and attempted to settle among, their Gallic neighbors.¹¹ The Germanic tribes and territory were never Caesar's main focus,

⁸ Dio. 61.18.3: "[the Germans] were not disturbed by the change in their manner of life, and were becoming different without knowing it. But when Quintilius Varus became governor of the province of Germany, ... he strove to change them more rapidly."; see also: Velleius Paterculus 2.117.2

⁹ Dio. 56.18.1: "The Romans were holding portions of [Germany]—not entire regions, but merely such districts as happened to have been subdued, so that no record has been made of the fact—and soldiers of theirs were wintering there and cities were being founded."

¹⁰ See Julius Caesar's *Gallic War*, Book 1.

¹¹ Powell 1998: 124.

however, and although it is said that he had future plans to return to Germany, his assassination in 44 BCE thwarted those plans.

After Caesar's brief interaction with the western Germanic tribes, the Romans began to treat the Germanic territory as a necessary border for maintaining the Gallic Province.¹² Eventually the Romans did begin to look at the Germanic territory as opportunity for further expansion of the Roman Empire, and the military became a more permanent presence in the northern territory. Under Augustus, various campaigns were enacted in Germany in an effort to further expand, but also to shorten the jagged northern border of the Roman Empire, however, in 7 CE, the province of Germania was declared pacified, and Quintilius Varus was appointed to govern the new province.¹³

It was around this time that Arminius returned home from his service in the Roman army. Varus had begun to set up the legislative infrastructure established with a new province. According to Tacitus in his *Germania*, however, the tribespeople were not a without strong conviction of their own. It is indicated that Varus treated the tribespeople not as allies or friends, but as subjects to be molded as he saw fit, as he found to be the case in Syria.¹⁴ The tribes of Germany did not warm to this approach, and with the return of Arminius, it was only a matter of time before actions were taken.

Arminius' younger brother, Flavus, and paternal uncle, Segestes, also maintained close relations with the Roman military presence within their territory. Like Arminius, Flavus was also an officer of the Roman military; however, he remained loyal to the

¹² Heather 2010: 5.

¹³ Velleius 2.117.1

¹⁴ Velleius 2.117.2

Romans throughout his life.¹⁵ We have no record of the events directly leading up to the Battle of Teutoburg, due to the one-sided accounts that survive in the historical record. The Germanic language in the first century CE was not written, with dialects varying by tribe, but perhaps being mutually intelligible.

What we do know from our ancient sources is that Arminius, heading an unspecified number of Germanic tribesmen, arranged for Varus and his troops to leave their camp and venture into the marshy swamps of the Teutoburg Forest, an area unfamiliar to the Romans and unsuitable for Roman battle formations.¹⁶ It is unclear exactly how the Romans were lured into place, but Arminius would have chosen this specific location carefully, as he was familiar with Roman military strategy and capabilities from his service. The classical sources also indicate that the Romans were led to this site through trickery, although the specifics of how are not obviously evident.¹⁷ Heinrich von Kleist's drama fills in this hole, providing a German side of the story. One suggestion has been that a messenger told Varus that an uprising began, to which he then responded. The imaginary uprising would have been most easily reached by cutting through the Teutoburg Forest, and the legions would have been mobilized in order to accompany him to quell the rebelling masses.

¹⁵ Tac. *Ann.* 2.10

¹⁶ Tac. *Ann.* 2.64: "Everything alike was unfavorable to the Romans, the place with its deep swamps, insecure to the foot and slippery as one advanced, limbs burdened with coats of mail, and the impossibility of aiming their javelins amid the water."

¹⁷ Dio. 56.18.4: "they received Varus, pretending that they would do all he demanded of them, and thus they drew him away from the Rhine, into the land of the Cherusci ... and led him to believe that they would live submissively without the presence of soldiers."

The Romans did not make it through the Teutoburg Forest, because they were ambushed and engaged in combat by Arminius and his tribesmen.¹⁸ The fighting lasted four days, completely destroyed Varus and his three legions. As for Varus himself, he had been warned of this deception earlier. Segestes knew of this plot and tried to warn Varus,¹⁹ who did not heed his warning, and instead led his troops to their deaths. Varus committed suicide after it had become clear that they were defeated.²⁰ The Romans were outnumbered, and the Germans had the advantage of a surprise attack. Following the battle, Arminius had the decapitated head of Varus sent to another German tribal leader, Maroboduus, in an offer of peace and alliance which was rejected and the head sent on to Rome for proper funerary rites.²¹ The revolt resulted in the deaths of approximately 20,000 Roman soldiers.

When news of the event reached Augustus in Rome, according to the biographer Suetonius, he was distraught by the news of the loss.²² Augustus placed the blame squarely on the shoulders of Varus, rather than on Arminius, as does historian Velleius Paterculus in his nearly contemporary account. The three legions which were destroyed

¹⁸ Dio. 56.19.5: "And there, at the very moment of revealing themselves as enemies instead of subjects, they wrought great dire havoc."

¹⁹ Florus. 56.30.33; Velleius. 2.118.4

²⁰ Dio. 56.21.3-5: "They were still advancing when the fourth day dawned, ... [when Varus] fearing that they [the Romans] should either be captured alive or be killed by their bitterest foes ... took their own lives."

²¹ Velleius. 2.119.5

²² Suetonius, *Life of Augustus* 23: "they say [Augustus] was so greatly affected that for several months in succession he cut neither his beard nor his hair, and sometimes would dash his head against a door, crying 'Quintilius Varus, give me back my legions!' And he observed the day of the disaster each year as one of sorrow and mourning."

at Teutoburg,²³ Legions 17, 18 and 19, were never again represented within the Roman army.²⁴

The Battle of the Teutoburg Forest is perhaps most remembered today as the turning point in Roman expansionist policy. Following the Varian Disaster, as the battle is commonly called, the Roman forces pulled out of the Germanic territory, leaving only a minor presence at the edges of the Roman Empire border with Germany. Rome did not attempt to colonize the territory east of the Rhine further, and the Rhine became the permanent northern border of the Empire for the following centuries.²⁵ Arminius is often given credit for spurring this shift in Roman policy, but this assertion may be exaggerated.²⁶

Although it was previously unheard of for a foreign people to successfully resist colonization by the Romans, earlier provinces had been acquired through motivation for the profit that accompanies controlling the resources of a new land. Germania was not acquired in this way. It was attained as a buffer zone for the profitable province of Gaul, and served to potentially even out the uneven, twisty border of the Empire. By 9 AD it had become clear that possession of the German lands was not profitable for the Romans, as the lands were unsuitable for agriculture and the societies not yet civilized.²⁷

Additionally, the people living there clearly did not want to be assimilated into Roman

²³ Florus. 56.30.36: "Never was there slaughter more cruel than took place there in the marshes."

²⁴ Wells 2003: 56.

²⁵ Loewenstein. 1945: 10.

²⁶ Heather, Peter. 2006: 58.

²⁷ Heather, Peter. 2010: 5.; Florus. 2.30.22: "Its loss was a disgrace which far outweighed the glory of its acquisition. But since [Augustus] was well aware that his father, Gaius Caesar, had twice crossed the Rhine by bridging it and sought hostilities against Germany, he had conceived of making it into a province to do him honor."

provincial culture. The upkeep of Germany as a province quickly proved to be more costly than it was worth.²⁸ The loss at Teutoburg was deemed unacceptable by Augustus, who subsequently removed the Roman presence from Germany, as well as removing Germans within Rome from his immediate vicinity.

Although the German province was lost to Rome, Germanicus and his troops returned to Germany, and to Teutoburg, in 15 CE.²⁹ The destruction at the Teutoburg battle site affected the Roman consciousness in the years following, and existed as a source of personal shame to the Emperor, Tiberius shouldering the burden after succeeding his step-father, Augustus. Germanicus' official mission was to recover the eagle-topped standards lost in the Teutoburg Forest, stolen by the Germans as tokens of victory. Germanicus and his men also, according to Tacitus, come upon the untouched battle site from six years earlier. Tacitus' account of this discovery is particularly moving, following the soldiers burying the exposed skeletons of their former comrades under the command and watchful eye of Germanicus. There is a tone of reverence in the account of Germanicus calling on his troops to pause and pay respect to their fallen brethren.³⁰ He was ultimately successful in retrieving the lost standards and victoriously engaged in battle with the Germans, regaining perhaps a small amount of honor on behalf of the Empire and its Emperor.

²⁸ Heather. 2010: 38.; Florus. 2.30.29: "But it is more difficult to retain than to create provinces."

²⁹ Tac. *Annals*. 1.43; *Ann*. 1.57

³⁰ Tac. *Ann*. 1.62: "And so, the Roman army now on the spot, six years after the disaster, in grief and anger, began to bury the bones of the three legions, not a soldier knowing whether he was interring the relics of a relative or a stranger, but looking on all as kinsfolk and of their own blood, while their wrath rose higher than ever against the foe."

Despite the efforts of Germanicus and his minor northern successes, Rome did not ever regain its grasp on the Germanic territory. Following his campaigns, Germanicus returned to Rome, bringing captives and parading through the streets of the city the pregnant wife of Arminius, Thusnelda,³¹ who Tacitus claims demonstrated the fighting spirit of her husband (rather than that of her father, Segestes). Thusnelda lived out the remainder of her life as a Roman prisoner, never to be reunited with Arminius in Germany. This course of action proved that Germanicus and the Romans were not aiming to recapture Germania as a province, but instead were searching for closure to the injury done to their collective pride by Arminius and his tribesmen.

³¹ Strabo 7.I.4

3. The Historical Arminius

In various forms, Arminius comes down to us through the writings of a handful of ancient historians. By “in various forms” I refer to the range of interpretations made on Arminius and his motivations and character. There are also minor variations on Arminius’ name, with some writers spelling it “Armenius”.³² As previously mentioned, my focus falls on the work of Tacitus specifically, although others have been brought into the discussion for the sake of the continuity of the memory of Arminius, as well as to offer counterpoints to Tacitus’ interpretation of Teutoburg and the man who led the attack. Out of these other writers, Velleius Paterculus is of particular interest, as the only writer in question who spent time in the Germanic territory.

Velleius Paterculus offers record of Arminius in his *Roman History*, a relatively short compendium of the history of Rome, spanning from the aftermath of the Trojan War to his own time under the reign of the Emperor Tiberius. His account of Arminius is covered in only four short chapters out of his entire body of work,³³ and focuses on the periods directly preceding and following the battle. On the battle itself, he writes only the following: *Ordinem atrocissimae calamitatis, qua nulla post Crassi in Parthis damnum in externis gentibus gravior Romanis fuit, iustis voluminibus ut alii, ita nos conabimur exponere: nunc summa deflenda est.*³⁴ In this brief statement, he defers discussing the battle until a future work, which we do not possess (or perhaps was never written). By

³² Dio, Florus, Strabo

³³ Velleius 2.117-20.

³⁴ Velleius 2.119.1: “The details of this terrible calamity, the heaviest that had befallen the Romans on foreign soil since the disaster of Crassus in Parthia, I shall endeavour to set forth, as others have done, in my larger work. Here I can merely lament the disaster as a whole.”

avoiding a direct retelling of the battle, Velleius is denying himself authority on the matter, leaving us to use other sources for information on the action of the battle.

The closest year we can date his *Roman History*'s publication date to is 30 CE, as a commemoration of his friend Marcus Vinicius taking the office of the consulship.³⁵ Velleius' is not the earliest account we have of Arminius, since Velleius wrote his work long after returning to Rome from Germany.³⁶ The only other surviving contemporary work from ancient literature we have is the Greek writer Strabo, whose *Geographica*, published originally in 7 CE and again in 23 CE as a second edition with additions that would have included his relation of Varus and Arminius at Teutoburg, which occurred after the first edition had already been published. Since the attack at Teutoburg occurred in 9 CE, this brings up the question of how many writings relating the event could have even been in existence before Velleius'. In any case, none have survived to the modern age.

From Velleius' *Roman History*, what *is* present within the content is also of interest to my study, as he introduces Arminius and Varus alongside judgments on their dispositions, if not their characters. Neither is portrayed in a entirely flattering or negative light, Velleius attempting (however successfully) to present a fair picture of the figures involved with the topic at hand. To Varus, he attributes a mild disposition and misreading of the situation upon arrival in Germania, rather than any malicious intent or

³⁵ Shipley 1924: xiii.

³⁶ Ash 2006: 117. Ash attributes the earliest account of the battle to Strabo, "while the rebel leader was still at large after his attack on Augustus' legions.

major character flaw.³⁷ Arminius he portrays as cleverer than the average *barbarus*, but accuses him of taking advantage of Varus' negligence.³⁸

Other authors were kinder in judgment to Varus and harsher to Arminius, asserting that the Romans had been wronged, regardless of whether or not the Germans had been provoked.³⁹ Strabo, for example, attributes untrustworthiness to Arminius and his supporters, but, unlike Velleius, does not preface these remarks with compliments to Arminius.⁴⁰ Cassius Dio, a Greek writer in the early 3rd century CE, painted Arminius as a total enemy of Rome, claiming that he pretended to accept Varus and the Romans in Germany long enough to organize his own forces.⁴¹ The writers Florus and Frontinus placed the blame on the shoulders of Arminius.⁴² Writers in the years immediately following the battle were more conscious of their portrayal of the Roman side, because of the recentness of the events. The battle would have been more current and more present on the Roman conscience. Velleius' proximity to the Emperor prevented him from being

³⁷ Velleius 2.117.2: "Varus Quintilius, descended from a famous rather than a high-born family, was a man of mild character and of quiet disposition, somewhat slow in mind as he was in body, and more accustomed to the leisure of the camp, than to actual service in war."

³⁸ Velleius Paterculus 2.118.2: "Thereupon appeared a young man of noble birth, brave in action and alert in mind, possessing an intelligence quite beyond the ordinary barbarian; he was, namely, Arminius ... This young man made use of the negligence of the general as an opportunity for treachery."; see also: 2.120.5

³⁹ Strabo 7.I.4. Strabo considers the actions of Arminius and his supporters definitively "in violation of the treaty" between the Romans (as conquerors) and the Germans (as their subjects).

⁴⁰ Strabo. *Geographica*, 7.I.4: "Those natives who have been trusted have inflicted the greatest harm, such as the Cherusci and their subjects. At their hands, three Roman legions with their general Quintilius Varus were destroyed in an ambush, and a treaty was broken. They all paid the penalty and provided the younger Germanicus with a most glittering triumph."

⁴¹ Dio 56.19.2: "Among those deepest in the conspiracy and leaders of the plot and of the war were Armenius and Segimerus, who were his [Varus'] constant companions and often shared his mess."

⁴² Florus 2.30.32; Frontinus 2.9.4

careless in his representation of Roman culpability regarding the circumstances of the events surrounding the Battle at Teutoburg. It might have also been considered proper to maintain a sensitive approach in recording the events, particularly while figures involved and relatives of the men lost were still alive.

Tacitus had the luxury of temporal distance from the situation. Our most unique representation of Arminius and his victory at Teutoburg is included in the first two books of Tacitus' *Annals*. He did not have to worry about the reactions of parties opposing his interpretation of Arminius and his actions. He is alone among the writers who portray the Germanic peoples as a whole in a positive light; as is he alone in the level of intimacy which he invests in his narrative on the inner workings of the mind of Arminius. It is the only work in which we as readers get to know Arminius as a person beyond his military role. Additionally, one of Tacitus' earlier works, published in 98 CE, is an ethnographic study on the tribes of Germany, and serves as the only cultural background for Arminius. Within the work, he does not focus on any one tribe, but instead treats them as a people united by a common culture and moral code. Tacitus presents the Germans as an independent people, different from the Romans. He portrays the Germans, however, as less barbarous than what one would expect given the previous stereotype of Germans in Roman literature. Rather than attributing negative, or primitive "barbarian" traits to the tribesmen and tribeswomen, nobler characteristics are associated with them.

The *Germania* is split into two parts: the customs of Germanic culture and a catalogue of tribes. By devoting a significant portion of the 46 chapters to the customs of the people, Tacitus paints a picture of the German tribespeople as a people of moral substance. Although he writes nothing about an official code of laws, they hold certain

aspects of life in reverence by following a specific set of expectations. According to Tacitus, marriage and war customs are observed in a highly specified manner.⁴³ By emphasizing the structure and purity of the tribes, Tacitus indirectly draws comparison to Roman society.⁴⁴ By writing that “good habits are here more effectual than good laws elsewhere,”⁴⁵ he implicitly includes Rome. Tacitus also goes into detail about the role money and lending play in Germanic society. He makes it clear that money held little value in German society, which instead functioned through trade and bartering.⁴⁶ So why did Tacitus make it a point to establish these things as facts, if not to serve as points of comparison?⁴⁷ Tacitus is effectually using the Germans to write about the Romans, but thinly veiled, so as not to endanger himself by appearing treasonous. Writing in Rome, Tacitus was in the midst of the political powers of the city. As he had had a successful political career himself prior to taking up his pen,⁴⁸ his readers would certainly have included the ruling class of Rome. These men would have been able to see through the veil in Tacitus’ *Germania*, which was what Tacitus intended.

The degeneration of Roman morality was something that Tacitus concerned himself with in his writing as a way to express his observations made during his political

⁴³ Tac. *Germ.* 14: “When they go into battle, it is a disgrace for the chief to be surpassed in valour, a disgrace for his followers not to equal the valour of the chief. And it is an infamy and a reproach for life to have survived the chief, and returned from the field.”; *Germ.* 18-19: “Their marriage code, however, is strict, and indeed no part of their manners is more praiseworthy.”

⁴⁴ Tac. *Germ.* 2: “The Germans themselves I should regard as aboriginal and not mixed at all with other races”; *Germ.* 19: “Thus with their virtue protected they live uncorrupted by the allurements of public shows or the stimulant of feasting ... No one in Germany laughs at vice, nor do they call it the fashion to corrupt and to be corrupted.”

⁴⁵ Tac. *Germ.* 19

⁴⁶ Tac. *Germ.* 26

⁴⁷ Ash 2006: 32.

⁴⁸ Ash 2006: 14-15.

career, and perhaps even served as his motivation for beginning his career as a writer. Tacitus' debut literary work, the *Agricola*, was a biography of his father-in-law Cnaeus Julius Agricola, who served under the Emperor Domitian, leading a successful military career, and who occupied Roman Britain; it is arguably Tacitus' most political work, if only for the fact that he had not yet perfected the art of veiling his actual message behind a pretext of history. He began from the very start to use his writing as a lens through which to express his own views regarding Rome, and particularly the political landscape of Rome. On the surface, *Agricola* is a biographical work about the life of his father-in-law, yet he interlaced the work with political commentary. The opening and closing chapters do not mention Agricola at all, and seem out of place, but give a clue to Tacitus' true intentions in writing the work: to comment on the Emperorship of Rome, at the time of Tacitus' life the rule of Domitian.

We have no reason to believe that Tacitus ever traveled to or came into contact with any Germanic peoples. So why would he choose to write about the Germans? In the first section of the *Germania*, Tacitus writes extensively about the moral code and everyday practices of the Germans, without ever specifying any particular tribe, assuming homogeneity among all tribes, which is a pretty large assumption to make. It is likely that rather than possessing a genuine interest in the Germanic culture, he was drawing pointed antitheses between the "barbaric" tribal people and his own "civilized" Roman society. Tacitus sheds a largely positive light on the tribes of Germany. He attributes to both men and women qualities such as bravery, honor, pride, and honesty.⁴⁹ Tacitus even goes so

⁴⁹ Tac. *Germ.* 6, 7, 14, 19, 21

far as to compare the armor of the tribesmen and the Roman toga.⁵⁰ This is significant, because the toga symbolically represented all of the desired qualities of a Roman man, so by attributing an equivalent to a people who had traditionally been seen as uncivilized, Tacitus is boldly asserting them as equivalent to Roman citizens in moral character and perhaps political culture.

It is clear that political and personal bias also played a role in the constructed picture of Arminius. Velleius Paterculus, for instance, had a close working relationship with the Emperor Tiberius, served under him for 8 years and was bestowed honors by him in 13 CE. He painted Arminius as the villainous enemy of Rome,⁵¹ whereas Tacitus, who had served much of his political career under Domitian, was, by the time he wrote his *Annals*, rather resentful of the Emperor.⁵² So it is unsurprising that he would shed a more positive light onto Arminius, casting him in direct opposition to Rome and the Emperor at the time whoever that might be.

Tacitus' *Annals* are interesting as an ancient source for the attack at Teutoburg, because not only is it an account written later than most other ancient accounts, but also because even within the larger work, the retelling is presented as a flashback, spread throughout in snippets in the first two books of the *Annals*. In these snapshots, Arminius is represented differently than the outlined characteristics of a German from his *Germania*. Rather than being used strictly in the context of the untainted, isolated

⁵⁰ Tac. *Germ.* 13: "They transact no public or private business without being armed. It is not, however, usual for anyone to wear arms till the state has recognized his power to use them. Then in the presence of the council of the chiefs, or the young man's father, or some kinsmen, equips him with a shield and a spear. These arms are what the 'toga' is with us, the first honor with which youth is invested."

⁵¹ Shipley 1924: xi-xii.

⁵² Krebbs 2011: 42.

context of his previous work, Arminius appears initially as a man caught between the two societies—a sworn citizen of Rome, yet simultaneously a Cheruscan. He is presented as an opponent of Rome, rather than an example of a German tribesman from the *Germania*. Arminius is portrayed as more “tarnished and grubby”⁵³ in the *Annals*, appearing in direct opposition to Rome, which is represented by Germanicus. Germanicus emerges as the champion of Rome, rather than Varus, because even though Varus was the Roman leader involved at Teutoburg, he is never credited with exuding the characteristics valued by Rome. Germanicus, on the other hand, stars in the *Annals* as avenging the wrong done to Rome by Arminius; that is, the loss of the legions and the Roman standards.⁵⁴ Varus had done nearly irreparable damage to the Roman reputation and prestige in the region, which Germanicus was able to partially recover.

The aftermath of the Battle of Teutoburg is foggy in the historical record; however, we can glean some information from the ancient authors. We can attribute his death to his own tribesmen, and at the hands of his fellow tribesmen in 21 CE, only having ruled for 12 years.⁵⁵ He did not live a long happy life as the German liberator, although that is the title he was given by Tacitus.⁵⁶ Though the unity of the Germans did not persist after Teutoburg, it is preserved in German historical memory as a turning point for German nationalism, and significant in establishing the strength of the German people. The battle is marked as the first in German history of a united German force vanquishing a foreign enemy, and has become memorialized as one of the most significant events in German history. While he may have begun as a purely historical

⁵³ Ash 2006: 33.

⁵⁴ Tac. *Ann.* 2.41

⁵⁵ Tac. *Ann.* 2.88

⁵⁶ Tac. *Ann.* 2.44: *Arminius pro libertate bellantem favor habebat.*

figure, and relatively minor in the scheme of the corpus of Roman historical literature, Arminius nevertheless was to rise again in early modern German literature following the rediscovery of Classical texts over a millennium after their original appearance.

4. How do we get to Hermann?

Upon the rediscovery of Tacitus' (and many other ancient writers') works in the late medieval period, German writers took his words about their ancestors to heart. Since the Germanic tribes of the ancient world had not been a literate society, modern Germans adopted the ancient perspective of German history as their own. They accepted Tacitus' ethnographic work, which shed a relatively positive light on them, as well as what was written about them in his *Annals*, as true. The figure of Arminius gave the modern Germans somebody around whom they could develop a sense of national pride. Through Ulrich von Hutten's *Arminius* dialogue, Arminius as a German hero literally was integrated into the hero culture of the ancient world. Hutten, writing in the early 16th Century, focused on Tacitus' picture of Germanic peoples as "the noble savage," whereas Heinrich von Kleist, writing in the early 19th century, used the militaristic rebel of Teutoburg history as a lens through which he could write against the Napoleonic regime of his era.

The lost manuscripts of Tacitus were rediscovered in German monasteries in the Middle Ages. A manuscript containing the first six books of Tacitus' *Annals* was brought from the Corvey Monastery in northern Germany to Rome in 1508, establishing a solid date for when Tacitus' account of Teutoburg and Arminius again reached the public eye.⁵⁷ The *Germania* appeared earlier, also in Germany, but had more obscure whereabouts. The Italian Renaissance humanist Niccolo Niccoli, along with Poggio Bracciolini, sought out a number of ancient texts, including the works of Tacitus: his

⁵⁷ Reynolds and Wilson 1984: 406.

Annals, Histories and minor works.⁵⁸ The *Germania* was found bound within a collection, which also included the *Agricola* and *Dialogue on Oratory* by Tacitus, as well as Suetonius' *On Grammar and Rhetoric*.⁵⁹ The collection of shorter works survives the ancient world from a single manuscript, which has been dated to the 9th century and was collected and catalogued by Niccoli in 1431.⁶⁰

This rediscovery served as the spark that began the long tradition of Arminius as a German cultural and national hero in German art and literature. As with the ancient texts, I have chosen to focus on select examples of modern German literature to serve my purpose, which is to show the progression of the transformation of Arminius into a wholly German entity. My examples span multiple centuries, allowing each stage of transformation to speak on its own.

The German humanist scholar Ulrich von Hutten was author to one of the earliest in a string of literary works that began to pop up after the rediscovery of Tacitus' manuscripts. In the early part of the 16th century, he wrote a series of dialogues modeled after those of Lucian, the 2nd century CE satirist. Lucian's *Dialogues of the Dead* provided more than inspiration for Hutten's *Arminius* dialogue; it also served as a starting point for the storyline of the work. Hutten's dialogue is largely derived from Lucian's *Dialogue XII*, which consists of the great ancient military heroes Alexander the Great, Scipio Africanus and Hannibal Barca competing for claim as the best man, with the mythological King Minos presiding as judge. The three candidates collectively discuss

⁵⁸ Reynolds and Wilson 1984: 406-411.

⁵⁹ *Dialogus de Oratoribus; De Grammaticis et Rhetoribus*.

⁶⁰ Reynolds and Wilson 1984: 406.

each other's achievements, agreeing ultimately on Alexander's superiority, with Scipio following and Hannibal taking third place, because he was defeated in battle by Scipio.⁶¹

Hutten alters the established order of the military heroes by inserting Arminius into the mix. His *Arminius* dialogue was published posthumously in 1529,⁶² and offers a challenge to the ranking of the heroes determined in Lucian's earlier scenario, picking up seamlessly where Lucian left off.⁶³ In Hutten's version Arminius demands that Minos reconsider his decision, including himself in the running for the honor previously bestowed upon Alexander.⁶⁴ Arminius calls upon the historian Tacitus to endorse his position, who then cites passages from his *Annals* in support.⁶⁵ Arminius systematically defends his position compared to Alexander, Scipio and Hannibal, acknowledging their deeds and accomplishments, and then explaining how he qualifies as superior.⁶⁶ In the end, King Minos refuses to retract his original decision, as that would be dishonorable,

⁶¹ Lucian 12.389: "By heaven, what you say, Scipio, is reasonable! So let Alexander be adjudged first, and after him you, and then, if you don't mind, Hannibal third, though even he is of no little account."

⁶² Walker 2008: 7.

⁶³ Hutten 24: "This, O' Minos, is an unfair judgement, if you were the one responsible for it."

⁶⁴ Hutten 25: "in this region of the Elysian Fields, the kingdom of the Blessed, ... I alone have no place. Nevertheless, if one had to bet on them [Alexander, Scipio, and Hannibal] or on me, and if you were the judge, I have no doubt that I would be given first place."

⁶⁵ Hutten 26: "If there are no objections, I would like to have that man Tacitus, formerly of Italy, come here because he knows what was attributed to me in his history."

⁶⁶ Hutten 29-31: to Hannibal: "I declared war on Rome voluntarily, faced in my own house with the treachery of Segestes and ... my own brother Flavius [sic], whose armed force stood on the side of my great enemy. I had soldiers who knew nothing about discipline or about military techniques, with arms that were practically useless."; to Scipio: "How can Scipio take greater credit than I, who in the shortest time, restored a Germany that had been completely trampled and torn apart."; and to Alexander: "Having taken the power, I did not receive a kingdom, as did Alexander from his father, nor, like others, did I receive an army from the senate."

but he does concede that had Arminius been present in the first round, he would have been awarded first place.⁶⁷

Hutten wrote this and many of his other works in Latin. As such, it made sense for Hutten to retain the Latin spelling of Arminius' name. As Arminius became more ingrained in German literature and gained prominence in mainstream German culture, a shift occurred. Arminius and the sense of victory associated with him, as having vanquished the Romans, was his defining characteristic. He became known as the liberator of Germany, and modern Germans adopted that heritage as their own. Hutten in particular felt a kinship to Tacitus and Arminius, because all three shared a "deep-rooted concern for the fate of their nations."⁶⁸

Before the rediscovery of the ancient Latin manuscripts and their revival in popularity, the Germans had possessed no written legacy. The Germans during Arminius' time were an illiterate society, with no unified history. They relied on oral stories and legends, passed down through the generations, as their heritage. It was convenient for the early modern writers to find a neatly packaged summary of their ancestors' history and traditions in the form of Tacitus' *Germania* and *Annals*. Arminius filled the role of liberator against Roman oppressors, regardless of the fact that all surviving accounts were written from a Roman perspective. Additionally, the Catholic monk Martin Luther famously posted his 95 Theses against the Catholic Church in 1517. The *Arminius* dialogue was written shortly after, so it is plausible to connect the two

⁶⁷ Hutten 35: "There can be no doubt, O' Alexander, that had he been competing with you here at first, then I would have awarded him the palm ... I hereby order ... that Arminius the Cheruscan is the most free, the most victorious, the most German of the Germans, and I decree that he be known as such here and there by all."

⁶⁸ Kuehnemund 1953: 13.

figures based on these parallels. The two men were contemporaries of each other in Germany,⁶⁹ during a time of strenuous relations between the people and the Roman Catholic Church, and both men wrote a significant part of their works in Latin. As Hutten's main character of his *Arminius* also confronted the Romans, it would not be presumptuous to assume that Hutten's *Arminius* was written in the same vein as Martin Luther's body of work: as a way to speak out against the Romans, though this time to the Church specifically.

Hutten preserves Arminius through the Roman concept of immortalization, that is, by placing him in the Elysian Fields. Lucian's *Dialogues* were set in the underworld, so it made sense to preserve the setting. He also uses the Romanized version of Arminius' name. Another German writer, Heinrich von Kleist, however, did not. Kleist's early 19th century drama *Die Hermannsschlacht* featured Arminius, now under the guise of Hermann, as the title character. The new name is clearly comprised of the two German words *heer* and *mann*,⁷⁰ identifying him undoubtedly as holding a position of authority within his tribe, as well as a military leader. It is unclear exactly when Arminius became Hermann, or to whom that change can definitively be attributed.⁷¹

Written in 1808, Kleist's *Die Hermannsschlacht* (but not officially published until 1821) was one of his lesser-known works. Through this play, a reader or audience member is transported to 9 CE, a short time before the attack at Teutoburg. Unlike in the

⁶⁹ Benario 2004: 87: "[Editions of] Hutten's work [were] published in 1538 and 1557 in Wittenberg (significant as the home of Luther and Melanchthon!), but the first German translation did not appear until 1815."

⁷⁰ "army leader/general" + "man"

⁷¹ Benario 2004: 87: "It was Martin Luther himself who may have been the first to equate the name Arminius with the German Hermann, thereby expanding his popular appeal."

works of the ancient authors, we get to see Arminius/Hermann in his natural habitat among his own people. This is Kleist's imagined German-perspective account of the battle and the events leading up to it. We see the interactions between the Romans and Germans up close and from a new point of view. The ancient writers were removed from the event, most by many years. Kleist was also writing from another time, and like the ancient writers, represented the stance of his own people.

Kleist does not remain faithful to the facts laid out by the ancient sources; rather, he inserts his own details about the inner workings of Hermann's plans prior to the attack at Teutoburg.⁷² The Hermann of this drama is a different Hermann than those of previous early modern writers, which feature a version of the historical Arminius. Hutten's 1529 *Arminius* wins over his peers of the Underworld by honorable merit, and in the end King Minos even declares that he is honorable as well as worthy of love and admiration.⁷³ Additionally, the 1689 set of novels, written by Daniel Caspar von Lohenstein, portrays Hermann as a man with honor and pride for his people and family. Johann Elias Schlegel's 1740 drama *Hermann*, as well as Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock's late-18th century series of odes chronicling Hermann's life, similarly attributes positive, if strictly dutiful, qualities to its title character. Kleist's Hermann differs from this mold.

The Hermann of Kleist's drama is not above trickery and lying, directly going against the good name attributed to him by the earlier authors. In *Die Hermannsschlacht*, he blatantly pretends to maintain an alliance with Varus and the Romans, while at the

⁷² Kleist 2.10.814-20; 4.3.1482-9

⁷³ Hutten 39: "it is truly necessary now for those who have become acquainted with Arminius, his nobility and inborn qualities, to acknowledge him and admire him. Henceforth, German, it is fitting that your honor increase and it is our obligation and my command that we never forget your virtues."

same time forming alliances with his neighboring tribes, significantly Marobod, the Marcomanni tribal leader who is also dealing with the Varus. Kleist fashions the alliance between Hermann's Cherusci and Marbod's Marcomanni similar to the contemporary (for Kleist) relationship between Prussia and Austria, which were both members of the Confederation of the Rhine – the short-lived band of client states under Napoleon's French Empire. Like the Confederation, the alliance between Hermann and Marbod included other tribes, but Kleist focused on the at times tense relationship between these two. They were the two tribes with the most influence over their neighbors, and their leaders' cooperation (or not) determined the wellbeing of the alliance with the Romans.

The Hermann imagined by Kleist is certainly grittier than earlier Hermanns, called by some an “anti-hero”,⁷⁴ more concerned with the end result, rather than the means used to reach that end.⁷⁵ His cause does not differ from his historical goal, yet Kleist's Hermann is willing to hurt his own people to secure his own success. He uses his sons, as well as his wife as Kleist's as pawns in dealing with Various Romans throughout the play. In the end, Kleist's Hermann is successful. The literary Hermann acts as a placeholder for a unified German historical hero, yet Kleist's hero is less romanticized than earlier versions.

Kleist also uses Hermann for his own purposes, that is, to express his political views and comment on the atmosphere of Napoleonic occupied Europe through the lens of a metaphor of earlier German/Imperial relations. After leaving the military at the turn of the 18th century, Kleist turned to writing as a second career. His experiences with

⁷⁴ MagShamhráin 2008 xxii, xxvi.

⁷⁵ MagShamhráin 2008: xxii; see also Kleist 3.2.945-954

military life and the politics of Europe influenced his writing.⁷⁶ The parallels between the plot of his *Die Hermannsschlacht* and the political situation of French-conquered Prussia prevented his play from seeing a stage in Kleist's lifetime, in Prussia and elsewhere. As Napoleon fashioned himself as a new Roman Emperor, the negative representation of Varus and the Romans in Kleist's *Die Hermannsschlacht* was heavily censored while Europe was under the Napoleonic regime. Kleist had hoped to have the play staged in Vienna, where French presence would have made the parallel roles in the drama obvious.

⁷⁶ Kleist came from a military family, serving the Prussian army himself from 1793 to 1799. In this way he experienced first-hand the Revolutionary France of the late 18th century, as well as the Napoleonic conquering and occupation in Switzerland and Prussia while living in both places after his time in the army.

5. Why YOU should care:

With the rediscovery of Arminius in the literary manuscripts of the ancient world, Arminius was reborn and redefined as a cultural icon in the context of modern German society. Along with the literary rebirth of Arminius came an interest in search for the location of the battle. After reading about the remains of Romans left on the Teutoburg battlefield for six years in Tacitus, it is natural to wonder what might be there now.

Until the 20th century it was assumed that the location of the battle lay near Detmold, as evidenced by the Hermannsdenkmal, which stands there now. The monument was finished in 1875 and placed atop the hill near by designer Ernst Blandel with the intention of reinforcing Hermann's place as liberator and guardian of Germany and its people. What better way of doing this than by positioning Hermann overlooking the very location where he vanquished over the Romans?

In 1885, the famous archaeologist Theodore Mommsen speculated the true location of the battle to be not near Detmold, but further north, near Kalkriese. This hypothesis was not confirmed, however, until a century later, when archeological investigations in the area yielded coins from Rome, none of which dated later than the Augustan period.⁷⁷ Furthermore, male skeletal remains were found in generally good health, with the exception of evidence of fatal skull injuries from sharp objects, such as weapons. In 1997, it was reported that over 3,200 Roman finds had been recovered in the area, 1,100 of which were coins.⁷⁸ The overwhelming presence of coins, along with the gender and age of the human remains, coincide with the findings of a military site.

⁷⁷ Schlüter 1999: 125.

⁷⁸ Schlüter 1999: 135.

The coins would have been present as the income of soldiers. Objects of daily life could be attributed to the non-fighting Roman military units, related to construction and maintaining the camp and aiding the soldiers who did fight.

Thompson had it right when he wrote the information we have about the early Germans is “valuable, but disconnected.”⁷⁹ The German people were not fully united until the 19th century, when Otto von Bismarck united the German people into one German Nation. It is problematic to attempt to construct a continuous narrative of Arminius. He was not interpreted consistently in the writings from the ancient world, now was he in modern literature. Yet Arminius/Hermann has come to represent unity among the often-disparate Germanic peoples during times of need. Arminius has served the needs of German writers of the Reformation, Napoleonic era, and German Imperial period.

By analyzing what Arminius meant to different people of different eras and nationalities, we can begin to understand the complex web that is the German identity. From rebellious Roman citizen, to liberator from the bonds of servitude, to cultural icon and source of national pride, Arminius encompasses all of these things. Over the course of two millennia, people have been using him as a means to examine the world around them and comment on the state of their respective society. Regardless of the true historical figure of Arminius, his name lives on in textbooks, literature, theater and art.

⁷⁹ Thompson 1956: 130.

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