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TACITUS' *GERMANIA* AND THE LIMITS OF FANTASTIC GEOGRAPHY*

Abstract: This article explores Tacitus' careful, simultaneous positioning of geographical boundaries and the limits of his own writing at the opening and close of the *Germania*. Three main aspects of Tacitus' engagement with broader debates concerning the place of mythic and poetic accounts in contemporary geography and ethnography are examined: the treatment of the supposed visits of Hellenic heroes to Germania; the portrayal of Ocean as a significant geographical and metaphorical boundary; and the strict rejection of fantastic ethnography. This examination both elucidates the *Germania*'s relationship with traditions of geographical and ethnographic writing and points to Tacitus' portrayal of the region as a potentially conquerable space.

Keywords: Tacitus, geography, ethnography, Ocean, Germania, Julius Caesar

Proper limits and boundaries were almost always an issue for the Romans when it came to their interactions with the region they came to call Germania and its inhabitants, the Germani. By 98 CE, the year when Tacitus most likely completed his *Germania*, an ethnographic study of the region and its peoples, the limits of Rome's imperial expansion had already been tested in the region of the Rhine for over a century and a half.¹ By forming a convenient natural limit to Roman conquest, the river had permitted Caesar to justify and account for the precise extent of his spatial advancement during his Gallic campaigns (58–50 BCE).² In his *Bellum Gallicum* (*BG*), the Rhine forms not only a natural topographical partition in the landscape, but also a strong ideological boundary, a hard frontier which facilitated the construction of an image of two very separate spaces on either bank of the river: a controllable, manageable, and vanquished Gaul on the west side, contrasted with an unruly, unmeasurable, and as-yet-unconquerable

* I would like to thank the editors and anonymous readers of *Histos* for their very helpful feedback and suggestions.

¹ For historical summaries of Roman interactions with the Germani and Germania from approximately the end of Caesar's Gallic campaigns to the writing of Tacitus' work see Rügner (1996), id. (2000), Goodman (1997) 217–21, and Rives (1999) 27–35.

² See Braund (1996) on the status of rivers as significant 'psychological' barriers, boundaries, and limits to *imperium* in the Roman world, and on the religious significance attached to crossing rivers, which were often perceived as deities.

Germania to the east.³ The creation of this hard boundary is enforced from the very opening sentences of the *BG*, when Caesar separates the Gauls and Belgians from the Germani both culturally and spatially, declaring that the latter are a separate people who 'dwell on the other side of the Rhine' (*trans Rhenum incolunt*, 1.1.3).⁴ In reality, the tribes labelled as either Germanic or Gallic later in the work were by no means as separate from each other in either spatial or cultural terms as Caesar makes out—in fact, the division was an almost totally artificial construct.⁵ The contrived demarcation and opportunistic imposition of the Rhine as a hard border, however, served an important political purpose: it allowed Caesar to trumpet the claim that he had conquered Gaul in its entirety, and provided an excuse to leave Germania, a supposedly separate land, as a space which might possibly be conquered by a triumphant Roman some other day.⁶

But that day never really came. By Tacitus' time the land across the Rhine had for the most part remained a physically unobtainable space for the Romans, despite the passage of time and a number of attempts to push far into the territory beyond the river's east bank. Augustus' attempted conquest of this area from 12 BCE had met with some initial success, though the reversal of the *clades Variana* in 9 CE put a stop to these advances. In the following years, the situation in the region was re-stabilised first by Tiberius in 10–11 CE, and then by Germanicus' annual campaigns in the years 14–16 CE. But despite these actions the Rhine remained the *de facto* limit of real Roman power in the region. In Tacitus' own lifetime, however, the German frontier was once again thrust into the spotlight by Domitian's revived attention to that area. As well as renewing fortifications on the Rhine, the emperor formally re-organised territory held on both sides of the river into two new (and relatively tiny) provinces: land west of the river became Germania Inferior, while the so-called *agri decumates*—limited territory which the Romans held to the east—became

³ See especially Riggsby (2006) 21–45, 47–71 and Krebs (2006) 111–36 on Caesar's careful creation of an image in the *BG* of Gaul as a controlled and conquered space in opposition to the image of an unruly and unmappable Germania.

⁴ On the importance of the Rhine border in the opening sentences of the *BG*, see, e.g., Wells (1972) 14 and Rives (1999) 24–5.

⁵ On the artificial nature of both Caesar's deliberate construction of the Germani as a culturally separate people and of the Rhine as a firm geographical and cultural border, see, e.g., Wells (1972) 13–31, Rives (1999) 21–7, Whittaker (2000) 313–4, Carroll (2001) 17–20, Riggsby (2006) 64–70, id. (2018) 71, Krebs (2006) 113, 119, id. (2011) 203–7, Schadee (2008) 162–5, and Johnston (2018) 90.

⁶ See Riggsby (2006) 28–32 on the opening of the *BG* and its establishment of Gaul as a single, unified geographical space; see also 64–70 on Caesar's presentation of Germania as a separate and very different space across the Rhine.

Germania Superior.⁷ Domitian also campaigned against a Germanic tribe, the Chatti, in 83 CE, and seems soon to have claimed that this offensive constituted a stunning new conquest of previously unvanquished Germanic territory—though Tacitus, predictably, does not seem to have had such a high opinion of the Flavian’s exploits, explicitly labelling the emperor’s subsequent triumph a sham in the *Agricola* (*falsum e Germania triumphum*, 39.1), and declaring in the *Germania* itself that in recent times the Germani had been rather more triumphed over than conquered (*proximis temporibus triumphati magis quam uicti sunt*, 37.5).⁸ In fact, these brief and cutting assessments of Domitian’s Germanic exploits seem to be broadly accurate: at the time Tacitus wrote the *Germania*, the vast bulk of the land east of the Rhine was still, for the most part, firmly under the control of various native Germanic tribes rather than Rome.⁹ Germania stood unconquered still.

Seeing as boundaries, limits and borderlines were at the forefront of the Roman ideological construction of Germania from the moment Caesar set about ‘inventing’ the Germani as a homogenous group of people who dwelt across the Rhine in his politically motivated *commentarii*, it is no surprise to see that Tacitus too is similarly concerned with limits and borderlines when it comes to writing about the region’s contemporary relationship with Rome.¹⁰ In fact, Tacitus is careful to delineate the spatial and geographical limits of Germania throughout his work. In doing so he simultaneously signals the

⁷ The only mention of the *agri decumates* in an ancient source is found at *Germania* 29.3, where Tacitus takes pains to diminish Domitian’s supposed achievements across the Rhine by labelling the inhabitants of this territory as Gauls rather than Germani: *non numeraverim inter Germaniae populos, quamquam trans Rhenum Danuviumque conederint, eos qui decumates agros exercent: levissimus quisque Gallorum et inopia audax dubiae possessionis solum occupavere; mox limite acto promotisque praesidiis sinus imperii et pars provinciae habentur*. On Domitian’s creation of the two provinces as a political expedient designed to disguise how little control the Romans had of the territory across the Rhine proper see Rüger (1996) 528 and Goodman (1997) 218.

⁸ See Sallmann (1987) 122–3, Rives (1999) 243–4, and Tan (2014) 199–202 on Tacitus’ disparaging view of Domitian’s involvement in Germania. Tacitus’ dismissive view of Domitian’s campaign against the Chatti is echoed by Pliny the Younger in his *Panegyricus* (16.3) when he disparages the honours which followed as ‘imitations of a sham victory’ (*falsae simulacra victoriae*). Cassius Dio’s later account similarly describes the honours granted as unwarranted since, as he reports it, Domitian’s campaign consisted of venturing into the territory of Germania and then returning without actually seeing any warfare (*ἐκστρατεύσας δὲ ἐς τὴν Γερμανίαν καὶ μηδ’ ἑορακῶς πού πολεμον ἐπανῆκε*, 67.4).

⁹ The idea of the careful ‘stage-management’ of a distant foreign campaign, followed by a subsequent indulgence in spectacles promoting a (sham) sense of conquest, is not limited to Domitian’s interactions with the Germani in Tacitus’ works: the presentation of Nero’s war in the east against the Parthians in *Annals* 15 is presented in similar terms: see Ash (2015).

¹⁰ The significance of boundaries, borders, and limits in this work has been pointed out by Rives (1999) 54–5, Krebs (2011) 204–5, Woolf (2011) 101, id. (2013) 138, O’Gorman (2012) 99–100, and Tan (2014) 183.

limits of his own discourse on the Germani to the reader, making clear what type of ethnographic description his work means to be. Certain elements of this process have been previously outlined, most clearly by Ellen O'Gorman, who noted the significance of the language of limitation at the very end of the work, when Tacitus explicitly signals the boundaries of both *Germania* as a geographical entity and the limits of his own writing by suddenly halting his account on the verge of launching into a full-scale exposition of 'fabulous' ethnography concerning supposed half-human, half-animal peoples located at the far northern bounds of *Germania* itself.¹¹ It is this dual process, the careful and simultaneous delineation of both the text's own limits and *Germania*'s spatial boundaries, and the effect which this has on Tacitus' portrayal of the possibility of future Roman conquest in *Germania*, which this article explores in further depth.¹²

The following discussion falls into four main sections. The first concentrates on the construction of *Germania*'s boundaries and limits in the work's opening chapters, and explores why previous reports of the visits of Hercules and Ulysses to this region pose potential problems in light of both Tacitus' insistence on the indigenous nature of the Germani, and his portrayal of the region as a space which should be firmly located within the known, and therefore potentially conquerable, world. Section 2 probes this issue further by examining Tacitus' place within broader debates concerning the use and place of mythic and poetic accounts in contemporary geographical writing, and concentrates especially on the relation of Tacitus' comments on Ulysses' supposed wanderings in *Germania* to Hellenistic literary critical theories concerning poetic and geographical truth and fiction, and the significance of Ocean as both a geographical boundary and metaphorical signifier of the unknown and/or fictional aspects of geography. In the third section I then turn to the *Germania*'s place in, and rejection of, aspects of the ethnographic tradition relating to the fantastic, unknowable, and unobtainable spaces which were thought to surround the edges of the known world in antiquity. Finally, after briefly turning back to compare Tacitus' approach with that of Caesar in his ethnographic account of the Germani in Book 6 of the *BG*, the last section examines the effects of (and reasons for) Tacitus' rejection of fantastic geography and ethnography. Through this examination further light is shed upon two specific, interconnected aspects of Tacitus' work: his deep engagement with past and contemporary geographical and ethnographic

¹¹ O'Gorman (2012) 118.

¹² The possibility of Roman conquest of *Germania* and its representation in Tacitus' text has attracted much scholarly attention of late: see Rives (1999) 55–6 and (2012) 53–4 and Krebs (2011) 209–10 on the *Germania* as an expression of Roman textual control of the region; cf. Tan (2014) 199–202 and Van Broeck (2018) 201–29 on *Germania* as an unmappable and consequently unconquerable space in Tacitus' text.

writing and thought, and his portrayal of Germania as a place which has not yet been conquered, but which is in fact a firmly ‘graspable’ space in both a cognitive and a literal sense.

1. Opening Limits: Hercules and Ulysses in Germania

From the very opening sentences of the *Germania* Tacitus is quick to delineate the geographical boundaries of the Germanic territory which his work will focus upon. The first sentence leaves the reader in no doubt of two things: that Germania is a space separate from Gaul, marked out by very explicit natural boundaries and limits, and that Caesar’s *commentarii* on Gaul and Germania have exerted a very significant influence on the framework of Tacitus’ writing from the outset (1.1):

Germania omnis a Gallis Raetisque et Pannoniis Rheno et Danuio fluminibus, a Sarmatis Dacisque mutuo metu aut montibus separatur; cetera Oceanus ambit, latos sinus et insularum immensa spatia complectens, nuper cognitis quibusdam gentibus ac regibus, quos bellum aperuit.

Germania as a whole is separated from the Gauls and the Raeti and the Pannonii by the Rhine and Danube rivers, and from the Sarmatians and Dacians by either reciprocal fear or mountains; Ocean encircles the remaining parts, surrounding broad gulfs and the vast expanses of islands, with certain tribes and kings, who have recently become known, unveiled to us by war.¹³

By emphasising Germania’s status as a territory which is wholly apart and separated by the Rhine and the Danube from the regions held by neighbouring distinct peoples, Tacitus’ opening words hark back to the famous partitioning of Gaul which opens Caesar’s *BG*: *Gallia est omnis divisa in partes tres* (Gaul as a whole is divided into three parts).¹⁴ As in Caesar’s work, features of the natural landscape separate Germania from its neighbours. Rivers and mountains are conceived as hard topographical boundaries which combine with equally forbidding psychological divides between different peoples (*mutuo*

¹³ All translations are my own. Latin text of the *Germania* is from the edition of Lund (1988).

¹⁴ On the significance of the echo of Caesar’s famous opening at the beginning of the *Germania* see Santini (2010) 361, Krebs (2011) 203–4, Rives (2012) 54, Tan (2014) 182, Kraus (2018) 283.

metu aut montibus separatur), while Ocean serves as the northernmost geographical limit of Germanic territory. From Homer onwards Ocean had long been conceived of as a stream which encircled the entirety of the known and knowable world (*oikoumenē*), a conception that renders its status as Germania's furthest northern border especially significant because it means that the region must be thought of as stretching to the very edges of the earth.¹⁵ As we shall see, Tacitus' early and firm establishment of Ocean as one of Germania's firm geographical boundaries signals from the outset that Germania is a space which can be known and understood: it reaches right up to the very edge of the known world, but no further beyond into the unknown. The means by which it might be possible to increase Roman knowledge and understanding of this most distant region of the known world are also hinted at in the *Germania*'s opening sentence when Tacitus briefly notes that previous military campaigns have recently rendered certain Germanic tribes and kings better known to the Romans (*nuper cognitis quibusdam gentibus ac regibus, quos bellum aperuit*).

Already then by the end of his first sentence Tacitus has presented his reader with a Germania which is a definite region apart, hermetically sealed off from neighbouring Gallic territories: a geographical space firmly self-contained and limited, but which nonetheless lies within the boundaries of the known and knowable world. This view of Germania as a self-contained and firmly bounded territory is reinforced further by Tacitus' comments concerning the indigenous nature of the Germani (2.1):

ipsos Germanos indigenas crediderim minimeque aliarum gentium aduentibus et hospitibus mixtos, quia nec terra olim sed classibus aduehebantur qui mutare sedes quaerebant, et immensus ultra utque sic dixerim aduersus Oceanus raris ab orbe nostro nauibus aditur. quis porro, praeter periculum horridi et ignoti maris, Asia aut Africa aut Italia relicta Germaniam peteret, informem terris, asperam caelo, tristem cultu aspectuque, nisi si patria sit?

I believe that the Germani themselves are indigenous and have not at all become mixed by the arrivals of and relationships with other peoples, since in the past those who sought to change their dwelling-places used to go there not by land but with fleets, and the immeasurable Ocean beyond [Germania], which lies, so to speak, opposite us, is rarely visited by ships from our Mediterranean world. Furthermore, besides the

¹⁵ See Romm (1992) 12–17 on ancient conceptions of the encircling stream of Ocean as the ultimate boundary of the known world; see also Murphy (2004) 172–3 on Pliny the Elder's conception of Ocean as the limit of *natura* and Clarke (2012) 45–6 on the idea of encircling Ocean in Tacitus' *Agricola*.

danger of a rough and unknown sea, after leaving Asia or Africa or Italy behind, who would seek out Germania, with its hideous land and harsh weather, dismal to cultivate and to look at, unless it were his native land?

Once again, Tacitus emphasises the free-standing nature of Germania, insisting that just as the region itself is geographically separate from its neighbours, so too are the Germani a separate and autochthonous people who are clearly defined and distinguished from all others because of the naturally bounded properties of the land they inhabit.

This strong emphasis on the autochthony of Germania's inhabitants in Tacitus' opening account, combined with the description of the firmly bounded nature of Germania as a geographical space, creates a strong sense of the region's exceptional nature and virtual insularity, especially since it is presented as being surrounded and demarcated by two defining bodies of water: Ocean and the Rhine. Although in reality these two bodies of water represent two very different kinds of maritime boundary in terms of scale, within the text itself the river is presented as a conceptual and psychological boundary as significant as any sea border, rendering Germania into a virtual island in Tacitus' account.¹⁶ This sense of insularity is even more striking if the depiction of the region's bounded and self-contained nature is compared to Tacitus' representation of the island of Britain in the *Agricola*. Despite Britain's geographical isolation and remoteness it is often represented in Tacitus' work as a space which is inherently connected to—and at times an extension of—the continent, particularly as Roman knowledge and control over the island increases.¹⁷ The sense that Roman knowledge and conquest has transformed the literal island of Britain into a space which is not as cut-off, isolated and remote as Germania is most striking when Tacitus' insistence on the unmixed, separate and autochthonous nature of the Germani is compared to his discussion of the origins of the Britanni in the *Agricola*. This discussion is found in a relatively brief excursus on the geography and peoples of Britain (10–12), within which Tacitus discusses three possible theories about the origins of the island's inhabitants (11):

¹⁶ I am grateful to the anonymous readers for drawing my attention, in various ways, to the idea of insularity and Germania's island-like nature in Tacitus' work. On the notion of insularity in the ancient world, and its application to both real islands, and spaces which are not literal islands but are perceived as such by their inhabitants and/or others see Broodbank (2000) 16–18 and Constantakopoulou (2007) 10–19.

¹⁷ See especially Clarke's excellent discussion (2012) of the significance of this shifting notion of Britain's insularity and its connection to the shifting portrayal of Roman intellectual and literal conquest in the work. On the paradoxical status of islands as locations which tend to be conceptualised as spaces which shift between the two opposite poles of extreme isolation and extreme connectivity see Broodbank (2000) 17 and Constantakopoulou (2007) 1–9.

ceterum Britanniam qui mortales initio coluerint, indigenae an aduecti, ut inter barbaros, parum compertum. habitus corporum uarii atque ex eo argumenta. namque rutilae Caledoniam habitantium comae, magni artus Germanicam originem adseuerant; Silurum colorati uultus, torti plerumque crines et posita contra Hispania Hiberos ueteres traiecisse easque sedes occupasse fidem faciunt; proximi Gallis et similes sunt, seu durante originis ui, seu procurrentibus in diuersa terris positio caeli corporibus habitum dedit. in uniuersum tamen aestimanti Gallos uicinam insulam occupasse credibile est.

But which people first inhabited Britain, and whether they were indigenous or had arrived from outside, is a matter which, as is usual among barbarians, has scarcely been investigated. Their bodily appearance is varied and from this fact various theories are put forth. The red hair of the inhabitants of Caledonia, and their large frames, point to a Germanic origin; the darker-skinned complexions of the Silures, their mostly curly hair, and the position of Spain opposite them support the idea that ancient Iberians crossed over and occupied this region; those nearest to Gaul are also like Gauls, whether due to the influence of heredity, or because the climate results in a similar body-type in territories which, facing each other, project out in different directions. But taking everything into account it is credible that the Gauls occupied the neighbouring island.

As Woodman and Kraus note, Britain is here represented ‘as having been always already occupied by a hostile force’, a space which is and always has been both intensely connected to more familiar regions of the continent and inhabitants from elsewhere—whether they be Germani or Iberians or Gauls—despite the maritime boundary between the island and mainland Europe.¹⁸ The difference in *Germania*’s status could not be starker. Despite being situated within the boundary of Ocean, and therefore within a space which is technically knowable (and, by extension, potentially conquerable), the combination of natural geographical boundaries, the autochthonous origins of its remote people, and the lack of a history of colonisation or incursions by others means that *Germania* remains a space apart, a relatively unknown and presently unconquered isolate within the known world.

But a little further on in the *Germania*’s opening chapters Tacitus’ careful positioning of the region as an isolated space, and the Germani as a unique, autochthonous, and hitherto unconquered people, is potentially threatened by the existence of reports of two significant mythical figures from abroad who

¹⁸ Woodman and Kraus (2014) 143.

some say had travelled through Germania: Hercules and Ulysses (3.1–3). Tacitus reports that the Germani seem to be aware of Hercules since they sing of him while going into battle (*fuisse et apud eos et Herculem memorant, primumque omnium uirorum fortium ituri in proelia canunt*, 3.1), and notes that some people believe that Ulysses spent time in Germania during his famous wanderings (*Ulixem quidam opinantur longo illo et fabuloso errore in hunc Oceanum delatum adisse Germaniae terras*, 3.2). These reports of historical contact between Hercules, Ulysses, and Germania must be dealt with carefully if Tacitus' argument concerning the indigenous nature of the Germani is to be maintained, since both of these Hellenic heroes and their followers often acted as conquerors, city founders, and colonisers in previously non-Hellenic locations far from the centre of the Hellenic world.¹⁹ As a result, their previous presence in Germania potentially entailed precisely the sort of contact with or mixing of peoples which Tacitus has already denied.

The potential threat which previous reports of the Germanic wanderings of Greek mythical heroes posed to the insistent image of the Germani as a self-contained and autochthonous people is made much clearer if we turn briefly to a text which presents us with one of the *Germania's* most significant antecedents in the sphere of Latin prose ethnography, the excursus on the geography and history of Africa in Sallust's *Bellum Iugurthinum* (17–19).²⁰ In this famous ethnographic discussion of the geography and history of the continent of Africa, Sallust connects the origins of the Numidian people, Rome's enemy in the Jugurthine War, to Hercules' mythical travels in the far west of the known world. In contrast to Tacitus' insistence on the indigenous and self-contained nature of the Germani, Sallust begins his account of Numidian origins by immediately emphasising the more mixed nature of contemporary African peoples, stating that his account will outline 'the peoples who first inhabited Africa and those who came after, or how these people mingled among themselves' (*qui mortales initio Africam habuerint quique postea accesserint aut quo modo inter se permixti sint*, 17.7).

In the account which follows, it is the western travels of Hercules in particular which turn out to underlie these complicated histories of autochthony, migration, and colonisation, and which help to explain the contemporary state of affairs on the African continent (*Iug.* 18.3–10):

¹⁹ See Malkin (1998) and Dougherty (2001) 5–7, 122–42 on Odysseus as a colonising hero; see also Malkin (2011) 119–41 on Hercules (and the Phoenician god Melqart, syncretically identified with Hercules by the Greeks) as the archetypal 'networking hero' in the west in antiquity.

²⁰ For the relationship of Sallust's African excursus to the ethnographic tradition and its place in the *B7* more broadly see e.g. Oniga (1995) 11–93, Morstein-Marx (2001), and Wiedemann (2020).

sed postquam in Hispania Hercules, sicuti Afri putant, interiit, exercitus eius, compositus ex uariis gentibus, amisso duce ac passim multis sibi quisque imperium petentibus breui dilabitur. ex eo numero Medi, Persae et Armenii nauibus in Africam transuerti proximos nostro mari locos occupauere ... ii paulatim per conubia Gaetulos secum miscuere et, quia saepe temptantes agros alia, deinde alia loca petiuerant, semet ipsi Numidas appellauere ... Medis autem et Armeniis accessere Libyes ... nomen eorum paulatim Libyes corrumpere, barbara lingua Mauros pro Medis appellantes.

But after Hercules perished in Spain (as the Africans believe) his army, made up of various peoples, lacking its leader and with many vying with each other for supremacy, was soon scattered in every direction. Out of this army the Medes, Persians, and Armenians crossed over into Africa on ships and took possession of the regions nearest to the Mediterranean ... Gradually these people [i.e., the Persians] mixed with the Gaetulians through intermarriage and, since they often tried out some territory, then sought out other regions, they called themselves Nomads [= Numidians] ... But the Libyans joined up with the Medes and the Armenians ... Gradually the Libyans corrupted the Medes' name, calling them, in their barbarian tongue, Mauri instead of Medes.

The explanation of the origins and descent of the Numidians from native Gaetulians and migrating Persians who had previously joined Hercules on his western travels in Spain demonstrates how mythical narratives of contact between Hellenic heroes and the west can be used to explain complicated contemporary histories of migration and colonisation, fundamentally linking distant foreign lands back to the Mediterranean world of the past. Moreover, these narratives of contact, migration, and colonisation can sometimes serve to explain, bolster, and emphasise certain aspects of an author's contemporary world-view. For example, in the case of the *Bellum Iugurthinum*, Morstein-Marx has convincingly argued that Sallust's inclusion of the report of the Numidians' descent from Hercules' eastern followers has the effect of implicitly aligning the Persian-descended Numidians with another contemporary eastern people with a nomadic heritage who were heirs to the Achaemenid Persians and Rome's contemporary enemies: the Arsacid Parthians.²¹ By emphasising this specifically eastern heritage of the Numidians, the stature and status of Jugurtha's people as formidable enemies who present a threat akin to that posed by the Parthians in Sallust's contemporary world is increased. It is Hercules' campaigns in the west, and the subsequent African colonisation which his followers undertook, which are portrayed as the vehicle by which

²¹ See Morstein-Marx (2001) 189–95.

Rome's contemporary conflicts in the east might be related to, and to some extent transposed upon, Sallust's narrative. In this way Hercules' travels from Greece to Spain can be utilised to connect Africa and the south with the western Mediterranean and the wider Graeco-Roman cultural world.

Given the use of Hellenic heroes in this way in the historical, geographical, and ethnographic tradition, the reports of contact between Hellenic heroes and Germania are therefore potentially more threatening to Tacitus' image of a self-contained and bounded region than they might first appear. In order to maintain his claim that the Germani have so far remained separate from their neighbours and almost completely impervious to outside influence throughout their history, Tacitus must handle the reports relating to the supposed temporary visitations of the two mythical Greek heroes carefully. The supposed visit of Hercules is not particularly difficult to explain. Tacitus begins by describing reports of Hercules' visit to Germania which suggest that the Germani sing of the Greek hero as the foremost brave man when they go into battle (*fuisse et apud eos et Herculem memorant, primumque omnium uirorum fortium ituri in proelia canunt*, 3.1). In this case, Tacitus does not specifically cast doubt on these reports concerning Hercules, though he declines to give an explicit opinion concerning the story's credibility. The supposed presence of this particular Greek hero in Germania is, however, easy enough to explain, since by Tacitus' time the Romans were well aware that many people had their own native versions of Hercules.²² For example, Varro is said to have known of forty-three Herculeses; Cicero lists six in his *De Natura Deorum*; elsewhere Tacitus refers to a native Egyptian Hercules in his *Annals*.²³ Later in the *Germania* he describes three Germanic gods, including a version of Hercules (*deorum maxime Mercurium colunt, cui certis diebus humanis quoque hostiis litare fas habent. Herculem ac Martem concessis animalibus placant*, 9.1), and later still he reflects explicitly upon processes of religious syncretism when he notes that the Germanic Alci are, 'in Roman translation' (*interpretatio Romana*), the equivalent of Castor and Pollux (43.3):

²² On Roman awareness of gods and heroes equivalent to or equated with Hercules outside of the Graeco-Roman world see Rives (1999) 122–3.

²³ Varro's view is mentioned by Servius ad Verg. *Aen.* 8.564: *tunc enim, sicut et Varro dicit, omnes qui fecerant fortiter, Hercules vocabantur: licet eos primo XLIII. enumeraverit.* Cicero notes at *N.D.* 3.42 that when speaking of Hercules it is necessary to specify which one is meant, since he knows of six: the son of Jupiter and Lysithoe; one in Egypt who is the son of the Nile; a third from Phrygian Mount Ida; a Tyrian Hercules who is the son of Jupiter and Asteria; a Hercules in India named Belus; and a sixth, the son of Alcmena, who is the most familiar Hercules. At *Ann.* 2.60 Tacitus once again reveals his knowledge of multiple versions of the hero/god when he notes that one of the mouths of the Nile is sacred to the Egyptian Hercules, the oldest version (*inde proximum amnis os dicatum Herculi, quem indigenae ortum apud se et antiquissimum perhibent eosque*); cf. Hdt 2.43–5 on the Egyptian and Tyrian versions of Hercules.

apud Nahanarualos antiquae religionis lucus ostenditur. praesidet sacerdos muliebri ornatu, sed deos interpretatione Romana Castorem Pollucemque memorant. ea uis numini, nomen Alcis. nulla simulacra, nullum peregrinae superstitionis uestigium; ut fratres tamen, ut iuuenes uenerantur.

A grove relating to an ancient rite is pointed out among the Nahanarwali. A priest in female garb presides, though they speak of the gods in Roman translation as Castor and Pollux. This is the essence of their divinity, but their name is the Alci. There are no images, no trace of a non-Germanic superstition, yet they are worshipped as brothers and young men.

The knowledge of Hercules which the Germani apparently possess does not threaten Tacitus' image of the region as one which is closed-off and separate from substantial previous incursions by visitors from abroad, since the idea of various tribes across the Rhine having a hero and/or god of their own who can be equated with the Graeco-Roman Hercules is a commonplace by this period.²⁴ Moreover, Tacitus' report of Hercules' presence in Germania does not contain colonising undertones, since no city foundations are mentioned in connection with his visit. The integrity of Germania as a region which has remained almost wholly impervious to Graeco-Roman contact, therefore, remains intact.

This would not, however, be the case if the reports of Ulysses' interactions with the Germani are to be believed. After describing the terrifying nature of the sound produced by Germanic battle songs about Hercules, Tacitus moves onto a more detailed description of Ulysses' supposed visit (3.2–3):

ceterum et Ulixem quidam opinantur longo illo et fabuloso errore in hunc Oceanum delatum adisse Germaniae terras, Asciburgiumque, quod in ripa Rheni situm hodieque incolitur, ab illo constitutum nominatumque Ἀσκιπύργιον; aram quin etiam Ulixi consecratam adiecto Laertae patris nomine eodem loco olim repertam, monumentaque et tumulos quosdam Graecis litteris inscriptos in confinio Germaniae Raetiaeque adhuc extare. quae neque confirmare argumentis neque refellere in animo est: ex ingenio suo quisque demat uel addat fidem.

²⁴ On evidence for the worship of a Germanic god identified as Hercules in Germania see Rives (1999) 159–60. See also Roymans (2009) 219–38 on the worship of Hercules Magusanus, an apparent syncretism of the Roman god and a Germanic hero or deity, whose cult was particularly popular among the Batavians on the west bank of the Rhine in Germania Inferior.

But some people believe that Ulysses also, during his long and fabulous wandering, visited the territory of Germania after being swept into the Ocean there, and that Asciburgium, which is situated on the banks of the Rhine and is inhabited to this day, was founded and named Ἀσκιπύργιον by that man. They even believe that an altar consecrated by Ulysses and with the name of his father Laertes attached was once found in the same place, and that memorials and certain burial mounds inscribed with Greek letters are visible there still on the border between Germania and Raetia. I do not intend to corroborate these claims with evidence, nor disprove them: each person may remove or bestow his belief according to his own natural disposition.

Tacitus' initial labelling of Ulysses' wanderings as a *fabulosus error* at the beginning of the report of the hero's Germanic sojourn immediately signals his inherent scepticism concerning this report, a sense which is only increased by the way in which the final decision concerning the credibility and reliability of the report (*ex ingenio suo quisque demat vel addat fidem*) is left up to each individual reader.²⁵ In fact, immediately after the report Tacitus once again goes on to

²⁵ On Tacitus' rejection of the report about Ulysses' visit see Anderson (1938) 46, 52, Norden (1959) 172, Lund (1988) 121, Rives (1999) 106, 125, 127, Woolf (2011) 101, id. (2013) 138, and Van Broeck (2018) 212–13. Tacitus' use of the adjective *fabulosus* in his historical works reveals his general scepticism about and distaste for the uncritical use of any report deemed to be *fabulosum* on the basis that such material is not generally suitable for the weighty and serious endeavour of writing history. For example, in the obituary of Otho at *Hist.* 2.50 Tacitus prefaces a report of a strange bird of omen which appeared in a grove at Regium Lepidum and did not disappear until Otho committed suicide with the disclaimer that while he maintains that 'seeking out fabulous things and delighting the minds of my readers with fictions is beneath the dignity of the work I have begun' (*ut conquirere fabulosa et fictis oblectare legentium animos procul gravitate coepti operis crediderim*), in this particular case the weight of popular tradition necessitates the inclusion of the report (*ita vulgatis traditisque demere fidem non ausim*). In the *Annals* there are further examples of Tacitus' careful and sceptical handling of material branded as fabulous: reports that serpents guarded the infant Nero are dismissed sceptically as 'fabulous things similar to foreign marvels' (*fabulosa et externis miraculis adsimilata*) at *Ann.* 11.11, while at *Ann.* 6.28 the more wondrous particulars of the story of the phoenix's re-appearance in Egypt in 34 CE are carefully noted to be uncertain and augmented with fabulous details, though the bird's occasional appearance in Egypt is an undoubted fact (*haec incerta et fabulosis aucta; ceterum aspici aliquando in Aegypto eam uolucrum non ambigitur*). Elsewhere in his historical works Tacitus suggests that when dealing with corrupt and powerful individuals in Rome it can be particularly difficult to distinguish between what is true and what is fabulous because of the customarily outrageous behaviour of such people. For example, at *Ann.* 4.10–11 a contemporary rumour about Sejanus' daring involvement of the ignorant Tiberius in his son Drusus' death is said to have arisen because of the public's hatred of Sejanus and Tiberius, which naturally leads to 'fabulous and monstrous things being believed' (*fabulosa et immania credebantur*, 4.11). Though he reports the rumour, Tacitus

emphasise his scepticism concerning these claims by repeating his opinion that the Germani have remained firmly distinct from other people throughout their history (4.1):

ipse eorum opinionibus accedo qui Germaniae populos nullis aliis aliarum nationum conubiis infectos propriam et sinceram et tantum sui similem gentem extitisse arbitrantur.

I myself agree with the opinions of those who think that the peoples of Germania have not been corrupted by any marriages with other nations: they have existed as a unique and pure people like only to itself.

There are two reasons why Tacitus might wish to downplay the credibility of reports of previous contact between this region and the Greek hero in this way. The first, as already noted, is that Ulysses' establishment of a colonial foundation in Germania potentially threatens the image of the area as one which has remained untouched by prolonged contact with outsiders: if he really did reach Germania, then it might be possible to argue that Hellenic, rather than Roman, culture had long held some sort of claim to this region as a result of Ulysses' early colonial exploits.²⁶ When seen in this light, the report of Ulysses' visit to Germania and the city foundation he was said to have been involved in there potentially becomes a serious stumbling block for Tacitus' argument concerning the indigenous nature of the contemporary Germani and their lack of extensive previous contact with the Graeco-Roman world. The second reason is that admitting the influence of Greek mythical heroes on the Germani also runs the risk of aligning Tacitus' work with a certain strand of geographical writing which permits the presence of the mythological and the fantastic as a mode of geographical and historical explanation. As the next section will demonstrate, Tacitus' decision to report and implicitly deny the

is careful once again to distance his own work from such material, explaining that he has only chosen to relate such an untrue and fabulous rumour in this particular instance as an example of false hearsay which must be discredited and as an encouragement to his readers not to accept such reports uncritically (*ut claro sub exemplo falsas auditiones depellerem peteremque ab iis quorum in manus cura nostra uenerit <ne> diuulgata atque incredibilia auide accepta ueris neque in miraculum corruptis antehabeant*, 4.11). Later in the *Annals* (11.27) the outrageous behaviour of Messalina is only emphasised further by the admission that although the report of her very public bigamous sham wedding to Silius might seem totally fabulous, it is nonetheless a true account, lacking marvellous embellishment, which can even be verified by the oral and written accounts of older authorities (*haud sum ignarus fabulosum uisum iri ... sed nihil compositum miraculi causa, uerum audita scriptaque senioribus tradam*).

²⁶ As O'Gorman (2012) 110 rightly notes, Ulysses' reported deeds in Germania 'are more indicative of the explorer and possessor ... The founding of a city is an uncompromising act of possession and power in a foreign land'.

veracity of this kind of use of myth instead aligns his work with an alternate stance in a wider literary and geographical debate which had existed already for several centuries by the time the *Germania* was written.

2. Ocean and *Exokeanismos*: Tacitus' Rejection of Fantastic Geography

Tacitus' failure to endorse the reports of Ulysses' presence beyond the Rhine makes a strong statement about the limits and nature of the geographical and ethnographic account he is attempting to write. An alternative approach would have been to endorse the reports of Ulysses' presence in Germania, a move which would point to an alignment with a type of geographical writing which views the Homeric poems as a resource containing true historical and geographical information, rather than fictional mythic stories. This approach to the historical and geographical aspects of the Homeric poems has a long critical history. Debates about the route and locations connected with Ulysses' wanderings, and concerns relating to the veracity of the geographical information contained within the *Odyssey*, were commonplaces of ancient Homeric scholarship from the Hellenistic period onwards.²⁷ The critical debate concerning Homeric geography formed around two main opposing positions: Ulysses either wandered around the seas of the Mediterranean and overcame his many trials and encounters with fantastic peoples and creatures in locations which exist in reality, or Homer completely made up these heroic wanderings and located them in a fictional, fantastic space far out in the Ocean, beyond the edges of the known world. According to the adherents of the former view, the location of Ulysses' wanderings in the real world meant that it was possible to mine the Homeric poems for evidence relating to the geography and history of the Mediterranean, while proponents of the latter position declared that this was impossible because Ulysses' travels, and the places mentioned within them, were entirely fictional.²⁸ Furthermore, Homer's deliberate placement of all of his fictions in a far-off location enabled him to fabricate and embellish his stories much more easily, because he was no longer tied to real-world locations which required a higher degree of accuracy and verisimilitude. Homer's supposed fictional technique was even

²⁷ On these literary and geographical scholarly debates and their broader cultural significance see e.g. Pfeiffer (1968) 166–8, Romm (1992) 183–96, Roller (2010) 112–22, id. (2018) 5–10, 16–39, and Lightfoot (2019) 671–97.

²⁸ Crates of Mallos is the most famous exponent of the former view, arguing that Odysseus had really travelled in the Outer Ocean (i.e., the Atlantic) and that Homer had recorded these historically real travels (see Crates FF 37–72 Broggiato); Eratosthenes of Cyrene put forth the opposite view, claiming that Odysseus' travels were entirely fictional (see Eratosthenes FF 2–11 Roller).

labelled with a specific literary critical term in antiquity: *exokeanismos* ('oceaning-out').²⁹

The idea that Ulysses was driven out into Ocean before reaching Germania (*longo illo et fabuloso errore in hunc Oceanum delatum adisse Germaniae terras*, 3.2) envisages a scenario in which the hero sailed out into the northern Ocean bordering Germania (i.e., the North Sea) and then up the Rhine in order to reach the region's interior, suggesting that Tacitus' sources for this report supported the idea that the wanderings refer to real-world locations and that the Homeric poems contain a core of some form of historical truth at their heart. In this specific case, however, the usual argument that Odysseus' adventures took place in the Mediterranean Sea has been geographically transferred to the more distant waters of the Ocean bordering Germania in order to permit the claim that the Greek hero and his fellow Hellenes were some of the first men to have contact with that specific area.

Tacitus' description of Ulysses' return home as a *fabulosus error*, however, hints that his views diverge from those of his original sources and are more in line with the proponents of *exokeanismos*, who consider Homer to have made use of Ocean as a fictional space which permitted the use of poetic licence.³⁰ Furthermore, poetic licence is something which may be brought to mind by Tacitus' mention of the place which the hero was said to have founded during his time in Germania, a settlement named Ἀσκιπύργιον in Ulysses' original Greek and *Asciburgium* in its Latinised form.³¹ This settlement was a real location (modern Moers-Asberg), mentioned by Tacitus in his *Historiae* as the location of the winter quarters of a Roman cavalry unit (*hiberna alae Asciburgi sita*, 4.33), as well as appearing on the Peutinger Map.³² Although in reality the toponym is actually most likely of Germanic origin, the Greek form of the name reveals the false etymology which those who supported the idea of Ulysses' visit to Germania had in mind in order to connect him with the foundation of the settlement, since the first half of the name can be seen as alluding to the bag of winds (ἄσκός) which blew the hero so spectacularly off his original geographical course in *Odyssey* 10, while the second element of the

²⁹ See Porter (1992), Romm (1992) 186–90, Buonajuto (1996), and Lightfoot (2019) 679–86 on the meaning and significance of the theory of *exokeanismos* in ancient literary and geographical criticism.

³⁰ On the suggestion that Tacitus is hinting at theories concerning *exokeanismos* in this passage see Rives (1999) 124–5, Thomas (2009) 67, and Woolf (2011) 103.

³¹ On the force of naming Germanic locations, tribes and customs with Greek or Latin toponyms or terminology and the way in which this constitutes an act of shaping and possession in the *Germania* see O'Gorman (2012) 105–9

³² See Miller (1916) 45.

name is derived from *πύργος*, meaning ‘tower’ or ‘fortification’.³³ For those wishing to argue that the foundation of ‘Windbag-Fort’ really was the result of Ulysses’ historical wanderings across the Rhine, it would make sense to associate his visit with the wild geographical repercussions which ensued from the opening of Aeolus’ gift, since the stages of the *nostos* which follow this event are the most difficult to map onto any real-world Mediterranean locations, leaving open the possibility that the land of the Laestrygonians and Circe, or the location of Tiresias and the underworld, might actually have been situated somewhere in, around, or en-route to Germania after all. On the other hand, for those who argue that Homer’s vague geography is a deliberate ploy to enable the introduction of fantastic fabrications into his poetry more easily, the apparent link between Asciburgium and Aeolus’ *ἄσκός* provides yet another reason for scepticism regarding Ulysses’ presence beyond the Rhine.

This is perhaps especially the case since the image of the bag of winds itself was used as a paradigmatic symbol for the poetic licence which Homer employs in his creation of geography in the work of the first, and most famous, geographer in antiquity: the Hellenistic scholar Eratosthenes of Cyrene (*c.* 276–*c.* 194 BCE). Eratosthenes, who wrote a *Geography* in three books and was probably the first person to coin the term *γεωγραφία*, was a vigorous proponent of the theory of *exokeanismos* and strongly rejected the historicity and geographical veracity of both Homeric epic and the mythical and poetic tradition as a whole.³⁴ From the many citations and discussions of his views on Homeric geography which are preserved in Strabo—a writer whose views on Homer are diametrically opposed to those of his Cyrenaean predecessor—it is

³³ The Greek form of the name *Ἀσκιπύργιον*, or a lacuna where it would appear, is included in the vast majority of the extant manuscripts of the *Germania*, though there has been debate concerning whether this is the result of a scribal gloss or not, since Tacitus tends to translate Greek, and is generally reluctant to include Greek words in his work. Although it is true that Tacitus elsewhere translates Greek terms into Latin wherever possible—Anderson (1938) 51 cites *Ann.* 3.65.3 and 15.71.3 as examples, though both differ substantially from this case in the *Germania*—it is questionable whether this creates a substantial objection to the inclusion of the Greek toponym here since, as Lund (1988) 121 points out, this case substantially differs from all other examples as the only one in which an etymological element is at all in play. Nevertheless, even if we write off the inclusion of the Greek toponym as a scribal gloss, Tacitus is certainly expecting his reader to pick up on the false etymological connection of the *Asci-* element of the toponym *Asciburgium* with the word *ἄσκός* to link this foundation with Ulysses’ bag-of-winds-powered wanderings. On the probable ultimately Germanic etymology of the name *Asciburgium*, see Anderson (1938) 50, Lund (1988) 121, and Rives (1999) 125–126.

³⁴ On Eratosthenes’ significance as the founder of the discipline of geography in antiquity, see e.g. Geus (2002) 260–88, Roller (2010) 1–30, and Bianchetti (2016) 132–49. For his views on the place of poetry and myth in the geographical tradition see Pfeiffer (1968) 166–8, Fraser (1972) I.527, Romm (1992) 185–6, 192, Halliwell (2002) 269–70, Gutzwiller (2010) 340–2 and Roller (2010) 112–14.

clear that Eratosthenes firmly rejected precisely the kinds of argument made by those who would later claim that Ulysses had really visited *Germania*. His familiar pithy comment on the likelihood of gleaning accurate and historical geographical knowledge from the *Odyssey*, which derives from a citation of his work in Strabo (1.2.15 = F 5 Roller), vividly demonstrates his position:

... ἂν εὐρεῖν τινα ποῦ Ὀδυσσεὺς πεπλάνηται, ὅταν εὖρη τὸν σκυτέα τὸν συρράψαντα τὸν τῶν ἀνέμων ἀσκόν.

... I suppose someone might find the location of Odysseus' wanderings whenever he finds the cobbler who sewed up the bag of winds.

For Eratosthenes, the ἀσκός is the ultimate symbol of the fantastic and fictional nature of Homeric geography. Depending on the ancient reader's stance towards the historicity of Homeric poetry, the etymological realisation that Asciburgium/Ἀσκιπύργιον was founded and named by Ulysses as a memorial to his windbag-driven wanderings would either confirm the fundamentally fictional nature of the report of Ulysses' presence in *Germania* as a whole, or provide convincing and historically confirmed testimony of Greek knowledge of, and potential claims upon, the land beyond the Rhine.³⁵

Tacitus' lack of endorsement of this report, along with his explicit labelling of Ulysses' wanderings as *fabulosus*, places him in the former camp. His scepticism concerning the inclusion of mythical explanations of geographical phenomena in the *Germania* is reinforced as the work progresses. The careful efforts of the opening chapters to position *Germania* as a space firmly situated within the known and knowable world, rather than in the realm of fantastic

³⁵ We might wonder whether those Latin readers familiar with contemporary geographical writing would be reminded of Eratosthenes' comments when reading Tacitus' report of Asciburgium/Ἀσκιπύργιον, since the Cyrenaean's work was certainly known in Rome. For example, in the *Letters to Atticus* (2.6(= SB 26).1) Cicero reveals that he planned on using his work as a model for a *Geography* of his own: *etenim γεωγραφικὰ quae constitueram magnum opus est. ita valde Eratosthenes, quem mihi proposueram, a Serapione et ab Hipparcho reprehenditur* ('for truly the *Geography* which I had planned is a huge job. Serapion and Hipparchus very much find fault with Eratosthenes, whom I planned to follow'), while Caesar cites his work during his ethnographic excursus on *Germania* at *BG* 6.24: *itaque ea, quae fertilissima Germaniae sunt loca circum Hercyniam silvam, quam Eratostheni et quibusdam Gr<a>ecis fama notam esse video, quam illi Orcyniam appellant, Volcae Tectosages occupaverunt* ('and so these most fertile regions of *Germania* around the Hercynian forest, which I see was known to Eratosthenes and certain Greeks, who call it the Orcynian forest, were seized by the Volcae Tectosages'). Pliny the Elder, whose lost *History of the German Wars* was an important source for Tacitus, cited Eratosthenes' *Geography* many times in his *HN* (see, e.g., 2.183–5, 247–8; 3.75; 5.39, 40, 41, 47, 127; 6.3, 36, 56, 81, 108, 163, 171; 12.53). On the reception of Eratosthenes' *Geography* in Latin writers see Roller (2010) 32–3.

geography represented by Ulysses' fictional windbag-fuelled journeys, are strengthened further when Tacitus returns to the border of Ocean later in the work. Tacitus' subsequent comments about the nature of Ocean once again support the idea that this body of water is an impenetrable barrier which marks the boundaries of human knowledge itself, simultaneously representing both a significant geographical borderline between known and unknown space, and a sort of symbolic boundary between the realms of historical reality and poetic fiction.³⁶ After mentioning the Greater and Lesser Frisii, tribes who occupy territory near the Rhine's mouth which stretches right up to the Ocean (*maioribus minoribusque Frisiis ... utraeque nationes usque ad Oceanum Rheno praetextuntur*, 34.1), Tacitus notes that Romans have attempted to sail out and discover more about this Ocean in the past (34.2):

ipsum quin etiam Oceanum illa temptauimus: et superesse adhuc Herculis columnas fama uulgauit, (siue adiiit Hercules, seu quidquid ubique magnificum est in claritatem eius referre consensimus), nec defuit audentia Druso Germanico, sed obstitit Oceanus in se simul atque in Herculem inquiri. mox nemo temptauit, sanctiusque ac reuerentius uisum de actis deorum credere quam scire.

Moreover, we have tested the limits of Ocean itself there: indeed, rumour made known that the Pillars of Hercules still remain (either Hercules visited, or we have all agreed to attach anything which is glorious anywhere to his fame). Nor did Drusus Germanicus lack boldness, but the Ocean thwarted examination into itself and into Hercules at the same time. After this no one assailed it: concerning the deeds of the gods it seemed more pious and respectful to believe rather than to know.

The attempts to test the limits of Ocean which Tacitus mentions here refer to several voyages undertaken around Germania's northern coast during Augustus' reign, first by Drusus between 12–9 BCE, then by Tiberius in 5 CE, and finally by Drusus' son Germanicus in 16 CE.³⁷ Drusus' expedition seems to have gone the furthest: he probably rounded the Cimbrian Peninsula (modern Jutland) between 12–9 BCE—a feat which Augustus takes credit for in his *Res Gestae* (26.4):

³⁶ For a broader discussion of the importance of Ocean as a boundary and geographical concept throughout the *Germania*, see Santini (2010) 361–370. Cf. Clarke (2012) 68–70 on the importance of Ocean in the *Agricola*.

³⁷ See Rossignoli (2005) for the suggestion that Tacitus approvingly alludes to Germanicus' expedition by using Ulysses as a symbolic representation of the Roman general when he reports the story of the Greek hero's supposed presence in Germania.

classis mea per Oceanum ab ostio Rheni ad solis orientis regionem
usque ad fines Cimbrorum nauigauit, quo neque terra neque mari
quisquam Romanus ante id tempus adit

My fleet sailed through the Ocean from the mouth of the Rhine towards
the east right up to the land of the Cimbri, a region which no Roman
had reached by land or by sea before that time.³⁸

Though he praises Drusus' daring, Tacitus nevertheless emphasises the inability of previous Roman commanders to open up and understand the vast expanse of the northern Ocean. In order to express the fact that the northern Ocean remains still a forbidding and unexplored territory, Tacitus claims that the Pillars of Hercules, which traditionally refer to the Straits of Gibraltar and symbolise the boundary between the known western edges of the Mediterranean basin and the unknown expanse of the Outer Ocean (i.e., the Atlantic), remain untried at the northern limits of the known world.³⁹ The mention of these Germanic Pillars presumably reflects a notion, present in previous geographical discussions of this area, that the famous landmark marking the furthest western boundaries of the world is somehow paralleled in its furthest northern reaches.⁴⁰ There are, however, traces here once more of Tacitus' scepticism concerning the place of myth in geographical thinking, as he notes that Hercules perhaps really did reach this boundary of the world, though that could just be a figure of speech, since anything which is glorious

³⁸ For ancient accounts of Drusus' journey into Ocean see Plin. *HN* 2.67, Suet. *Claud.* 1.2, and Cass. Dio 54.32.2. On the historical background of this expedition see Rives (1999) 28, 263–4. See Nicolet (1991) 87, 91–4 n. 17 for the evidence that Augustus' statement in the *Res Gestae* relates to Drusus' expedition rather than Tiberius' campaign in 5 CE.

³⁹ See Clarke (2012) 39–48 on the importance of the conception of geographical spaces which are 'beyond the pillars' in Greek *periplus* literature and the significance of this conception in the background of Tacitus' *Agricola*.

⁴⁰ The sense that previous traditions linking Hercules and Ulysses to Iberia have been somehow transferred from the far west to Germania is there throughout Tacitus' report concerning their presence in this region, as well as in this mention of the northern Pillars of Hercules. Norden (1959) 171–2 correctly notes that the earlier literary tradition associates both Hercules and Ulysses with visits to, and the establishment of foundations in, Iberia; and that this is echoed at *Germ.* 3.2–3. For Ulysses' presence in the far west, see, e.g., Strabo's report that Odysseus founded a temple of Athene and an Iberian city called Odysseia: ἀλλὰ καὶ ἐν τῇ Ἰβηρίᾳ Ὀδύσσεια πόλις δείκνυται καὶ Ἀθηνᾶς ἱερὸν καὶ ἄλλα μυρία ἔχνη τῆς τε ἐκείνου πλάνης, 3.2.13; cf. 3.4.3: ὑπὲρ δὲ τῶν τόπων ἐν τῇ ὀρεινῇ δείκνυται Ὀδύσσεια καὶ τὸ ἱερὸν τῆς Ἀθηνᾶς ἐν αὐτῇ ... ὑπομνήματα τῆς πλάνης τῆς Ὀδυσσεύως ἐν τῷ ἱερῷ τῆς Ἀθηνᾶς ἀσπίδας προσπεπαταλευσθαι καὶ ἀκροστόλια. For more detail on the belief in antiquity that Odysseus had visited Iberia, see Fear (1992).

anywhere is automatically associated with him (*siue adiit Hercules, seu quidquid ubique magnificentum est in claritatem eius referre consensimus*).

Tacitus' final comment (*sanctiusque ac reuerentius uisum de actis deorum credere quam scire*) reinforces the sense that Hercules and his deeds should remain firmly in the realm of myth rather than becoming legitimate objects of geographical or historical inquiry by suggesting that even to attempt to go much beyond such a landmark is an impossible and potentially sacrilegious deed for mortals.⁴¹ This image of the Pillars of Hercules as the limiting boundary of possible human endeavour is very familiar from the literary tradition, most closely echoing Pindar's repeated use of this landmark as a boundary marking the limits of human success and achievement beyond which it is possible only for mythic figures such as Hercules to go. The most pertinent example of such Pindaric imagery in relation to Tacitus' comments is found at the end of *Olympian* 3, an ode in which an account of Hercules' journey to the far-northern land of the Hyperboreans to bring the olive tree back to Olympia is narrated to celebrate Theron of Acragas' victory in the Olympic chariot race of 476 BCE. After describing Hercules' journey to the fantastic land of the Hyperboreans, Pindar turns to the Pillars at the poem's end to praise Theron for his glorious sporting achievement (3.43–5):

νῦν δὲ πρὸς ἔσχατιάν
 Θήρων ἀρεταῖσιν ἰκάνων ἄπτεται
 οἴκοθεν Ἡρακλέος
 σταλᾶν. τὸ πρόσω δ' ἐστὶ σοφοῖς ἄβατον
 κᾶσόφοις. οὐ νιν διώξω· κεινὸς εἶην.

But now Theron through his own innate excellence reaches the furthest point, he grasps hold of the Pillars of Heracles. Beyond this point is not to be accessed by anyone, wise or unwise. Nor will I seek after it: I would be foolish.

Here the Pillars' status as a marker of geographical limits is used metaphorically to represent the furthest permissible limits of human excellence beyond which it is not possible or practicable for mortals to venture.⁴² Tacitus' similar use of the image of the Pillars in the *Germania* therefore carries several suggestive undertones. On the one hand, Drusus, like the *laudandus* of Pindaric

⁴¹ On the role of Ocean here as a boundary between the knowable mortal sphere and the divine see also O'Gorman (2012) 100. On the image of the Pillars as a boundary marker between the known and unknown, possible and impossible in the ancient literary tradition see Romm (1992) 17–18.

⁴² Cf. Pindar's similar use of the Pillars as an image of the furthestmost limit of successful human endeavour at *Nem.* 3.20–3 and *Isthm.* 4.11–13.

epinician, is praised for reaching the very limits of the mortal sphere in pushing forwards to the Germanic Pillars, a marker of the twofold boundary of human geographical advancement and human knowledge; on the other, the impossibility of going beyond this limit is firmly stressed, and the location of myth in the realm of belief and speculation rather than knowledge is made clear.

Furthermore, there are signs that this geographical and spatial conception of knowledge, myth, and belief—a conception which hints at Tacitus' engagement with theories of *exokeanismos*—underlines the treatment of Ocean as a boundary between true and false discourse elsewhere in his work.⁴³ This is particularly the case when we consider how he handles the German expedition of Drusus' son Germanicus in *Annals* 2. In this case, Germanicus' decision to reach his winter quarters by transporting most of his troops down the river Ems and into the Ocean, rather than conducting his men over land (*pluris Caesar classi inpositas per flumen Amisiam Oceano invexit*, 2.23), culminates in a lengthy description of a huge and terrifying storm which overcomes the Romans because of their unfamiliarity with Ocean's waters (*milesque pavidus et casuum maris ignarus*, 2.23). The difficulty of comprehending the nature of Ocean and the distant lands situated beyond its bounds is made clear by the effect of such a journey on a few of Germanicus' men who finally return to more familiar territory after being dispersed by the tempest (2.24):

ut quis ex longinquo reuenerat, miracula narrabant, uim turbinum et inauditas uolucris, monstra maris, ambiguas hominum et beluarum formas, uisa siue ex metu credita.

Anyone who had returned from afar began to tell of marvels—the power of whirlwinds, birds unheard-of, monsters of the deep, hybrid forms of men and beasts—things seen or believed out of fear.⁴⁴

⁴³ On the 'fictive quality' which events on the Ocean tend to take on in Tacitus' works see Clarke (2012) 69–70.

⁴⁴ Tacitus recounts another frightening and unusual episode in the Ocean at *Agr.* 28 when he describes how an auxiliary cohort of Germanic Usipi, conscripted by the Romans and brought to Britain, mutiny, murder their Roman commanders, and commandeer ships. They try to return home but run out of supplies and end up cannibalising each other (*eo ad extremum inopiae uenere, ut infirmisimos suorum, mox sorte ductos uescerentur*, 28.2) while accidentally circumnavigating Britain (*atque ita circumuecti Britanniam*, 28.3): the survivors' later tale of this strange and gruesome maritime mishap in the north-west makes them famous (*fuere quos ... indicium tanti casus inlustrauit*, 28.3). As Ash (2010) 286–7 points out, this terrifying reported incident on the sea can be compared to the type of phenomena which Germanicus' men are said to narrate at *Ann.* 2.24. The connection between the two episodes is particularly striking since the Usipi themselves have become one of the Ocean's *miracula* in Tacitus' description as they sail away with their commandeered ships (*ut miraculum praeuehebantur*,

The autoptic nature of the reports emanating from distant regions beyond the boundaries of the known world might be thought to increase the reliability of the information contained within them, but in this case in *Annals* 2 Tacitus emphasises the fact that the initial unfamiliarity of such regions to the observer might still lead to the production of wondrous and fantastic accounts.⁴⁵ In the *Germania* Ocean and the regions which lie beyond its encircling border of the known world are similarly represented as natural spaces for mythic accounts and for actions which fall outside the sphere of normal and permissible human piety and mortal endeavour. The land of Germania itself, however, is not at all presented as such a space: the Germani may be culturally ‘other’, but they are not so distant that they occupy an unknown territory full of the fantastic visions and mythical figures which are naturally to be found beyond the bounds of Ocean.

In the opening chapters of the work the focus upon the geographical boundaries of Germania, in conjunction with Tacitus’ clear scepticism concerning the reports concerning the visits of Hellenic heroes to this area, expresses a disinclination to admit the potentially more fantastic elements of mythic geography into discussions of the region. Germania is presented as a region which is currently separate from all others, but which is nonetheless located within the known world, even if it is situated at its very furthest limits. Since it is ultimately knowable, it is therefore also potentially obtainable—at least for a Roman who is able to operate at the furthest limits of human endeavour. Throughout the opening chapters of the *Germania* Tacitus takes pains to draw the limits of this spatial balancing act, returning to similar ideas from a different angle at its very end, a matter to which the next section turns.

28.1; on this linguistic echo see also Clarke (2012) 69–70); their enforced cannibalism turns them into *monstra maris*, worthy of being recounted by Germanicus’ men.

⁴⁵ See also the very similar imagery used to describe the awe-inspiring, fantastic, and frightening aspects of Germanicus’ voyage into Ocean preserved in a fragment of a poem by the Augustan writer Albinovanus Pedo (fr. 228 Hollis), preserved at Sen. *Suas.* 1.15. In this fragment Germanicus’ men are described as ‘exiles from the known boundaries of the earth’ (*notis extorres finibus orbis*, 2) while undertaking their voyage, as Ocean itself terrifies them with its ‘sea-dogs’ and ‘savage sea-monsters everywhere’ (*hunc illum, pigris immania monstra sub undis | qui ferat, Oceanum, qui saevas undique pristis | aequoreosque canes*). The sense that there is a risk of transgression against the gods conveyed by Tacitus’ account of Drusus’ journey into the northern Ocean at *Germ.* 34.2 is echoed by the closing lines of this fragment of Pedo’s poetic treatment of Germanicus’ voyage (20–3): *di revocant rerumque vetant cognoscere finem | mortales oculos? aliena quid aequora remis | et sacras violamus aquas divumque quietas | turbamus sedes?* (‘do the gods call us back, do they forbid mortal eyes to learn of the limit of things? For what reason do we defile foreign seas and holy waters with oars, for what reason do we disturb the territory of gods?’).

3. Final Limits: Tacitus' Rejection of Fantastic Ethnography

Like its opening sentences, the final words of the *Germania* betray a concern for the drawing of proper boundaries and limits. Tacitus' closing comments mark the culmination of the lengthy descriptive catalogue of the region's various different tribes which constitutes the second half of his work as a whole (27.2–46.4).⁴⁶ This catalogue begins west of the Rhine with descriptions of Gallic tribes who once lived in Germanic territory and Germanic tribes who now inhabit Gallic territory, moving gradually through the interior and towards *Germania*'s distant northern shore, ending finally with the ferocious Fenni, by far the most savage of all the peoples located in this region (46.3):

Fennis mira feritas, foeda paupertas: non arma, non equi, non penates; uictui herba, uestitui pelles, cubile humus; solae in sagittis spes, quas inopia ferri ossibus asperant. idemque uenatus uiros pariter ac feminas alit; passim enim comitantur partemque praedae petunt. nec aliud infantibus ferarum imbriumque suffugium quam ut in aliquo ramorum nexu contegantur: huc redeunt iuuenes, hoc senum receptaculum. sed beatius arbitrantur quam ingemere agris, illaborare domibus, suas alienasque fortunas spe metuque uersare: securi aduersus homines, securi aduersus deos rem difficillimam assecuti sunt, ut illis ne uoto quidem opus esset.

The Fenni live in astonishing savagery and horrible poverty: they have no weapons, no horses, no household gods; grass for sustenance, pelts for clothing, the ground for rest; all their hopes are in arrows, which lacking iron they tip with bones. The same hunt supports men and women equally, since women accompany them everywhere and seek a portion of the spoil. There is no shelter for their children from wild beasts or rain except being covered by some interlacing of branches: their young men return here, this is the shelter for the old. But they think this more fortunate than groaning over fields, labouring at building houses, thinking over their own fortunes and those of others with hope and with fear. Unconcerned by men, unconcerned by gods, they have attained the most difficult thing of all: they are in need not even of prayers.

The Fenni's savagery is unparalleled by any other tribe: their distance from the norms of civilised life is echoed by the spatial location of their territory next

⁴⁶ See Rives (2002) 169–73 on the structure and organisation of the catalogue of tribes in the second half of the *Germania*.

to Ocean, Germania's extreme north-eastern border. Tacitus' final account of these people, who lack the use of the most basic forms of shelter and agriculture and seem even to lack respect for the gods themselves, therefore leaves us at the extremities of human culture itself, as far as we can possibly be from the behavioural norms of Rome both spatially and culturally.

In his description of the Fenni Tacitus adheres to a general principle of ancient ethnographic writing: as proximity to the world's edges increases, the strangeness and unfamiliarity of the cultures encountered tends to grow in tandem with the increase in spatial distance from the Mediterranean, conceived of by both the Greeks and the Romans as the civilised and civilising centre of the known world.⁴⁷ This tendency to represent spaces as increasingly strange and uncivilised as one travels further away from the Graeco-Roman world is certainly one which Tacitus' predecessors strongly adhered to in the tradition of Latin prose geographical and ethnographic writing. For example, in Caesar's *Bellum Gallicum* the culture and society of the Germani living in the territory across the Rhine is presented as significantly less structured and civilised than that of the Gallic peoples, as the Germanic ethnography in Book 6 makes clear. Unlike the Gallic tribes which Caesar encounters, the Germani are said to subsist primarily on milk, cheese and meat rather than grain (*maiorque pars eorum uictus in lacte, caseo, carne consistit*, 6.22) and to live nomadically, with no tribe possessing land of their own but instead moving on year by year at the instruction of their magistrates and chiefs (*neque quisquam agri modum certum aut fines habet proprios; sed magistratus ac principes ... quantum et quo loco uisum est agri attribuunt atque anno post alio transire cogunt*, 6.22).⁴⁸

Spatial distance from Rome goes similarly hand in hand with increasingly strange and uncivilised cultural norms in Sallust's ethnography of Africa in the *Bellum Iugurthinum*. Sallust describes Africa's first inhabitants, the Gaetulians and Libyans, as harsh and uncivilised nomads without fixed abodes (*Africam initio habuere Gaetuli et Libyes, asperi incultique, quis cibus erat caro ferina atque humi pabulum uti pecoribus. ii neque moribus neque lege aut imperio cuiusquam regebantur: uagi palantes quas nox coegerat sedes habebant*, 18.1–2). In time the Persians who joined the native Gaetulians adopted their nomadic ways and become Numidians,

⁴⁷ On this principle more generally in discussions of the lands situated towards the edges of the earth in the ancient ethnographic tradition, see Romm (1992). On Tacitus' relationship to the previous ethnographic tradition in the *Germania* in general, see Thomas (1982) 124–32, Rives (1999) 11–21, and id. (2002) 164–5.

⁴⁸ Cf. the ethnographic description at *BG* 4.1 which notes the nomadism and limited practice of agriculture of the Germanic Suebi: *sic neque agri cultura nec ratio atque usus belli intermittitur. sed privati ac separati agri apud eos nihil est, neque longius anno remanere uno in loco colendi causa licet. neque multum frumento, sed maximam partem lacte atque pecore vivunt multum sunt in venationibus*. On these features as typical of nomadism in the ancient literary tradition see Shaw (1982–3); on Germanic nomadism in the *BG* see Krebs (2006) 122–3 and Riggsby (2006) 60–2.

unlike the Libyans who combined with Armenians and Medes to become the Mauri.⁴⁹ Sallust repeatedly explains the divergence between these two African peoples in purely spatial terms. When the Persians who become Numidians arrive in Africa they occupy territory which is closer to Ocean, i.e., closer to the edges of the earth beyond the Pillars of Hercules, and as a result are cut off from trade with the Mediterranean, having to fashion huts out of the inverted hulls of their ships rather than being able to purchase timber to construct fixed settlements (*sed Persae intra Oceanum magis, iique alueos nauium inuersos pro tuguriis habuere, quia neque materia in agris neque ab Hispanis emendi aut mutandi copia erat*, 18.5). The Gaetulians they join with are also more distant from the Mediterranean coast than the native Libyans, occupying the African interior (*Medis autem et Armeniis accessere Libyes—nam ii propius mare Africum agitabant, Gaetuli sub sole magis, haud procul ab ardoribus*, 18.9). As a result, the Numidians occupy a more remote position from the civilising effects of the Graeco-Roman world than the Mauri, who soon settle into a more urban lifestyle, building towns and developing trade, because they occupy territory on the African coast which is closer to the more conventional and civilised Mediterranean culture of Iberia (*iique mature oppida habuere; nam freto diuisi ab Hispania mutare res inter se instituerant*, 18.9).

But it is another Latin ethnographic description of Africa and its peoples, found in the work of the earliest extant Roman geographer, Pomponius Mela (fl. 43 CE), which provides the most illuminating comparandum when it comes to thinking about how Tacitus handles ethnographic descriptions of increasingly distant Germanic spaces and tribes. In a detailed account of various African tribes (1.41–8) in his *Chorographia*, Mela begins his description from the coast, the space which is physically closest to the Mediterranean world, before gradually moving further into the continent's interior. He describes various characteristics of the increasingly uncivilised and unusual inhabitants of the continent, even suggesting that some of the more remote African tribes are closer to the animal rather than human world.⁵⁰ The Africans on the coast are to a great extent Romanised and familiar with Roman customs (*orae sic habitantur ad nostrum maxime ritum moratis cultoribus*, 1.41), but this civilised, urban way of life does not persist very far into the continent: those who live slightly further away from the coast shun cities and instead live, like the Persians who migrated to Africa in Sallust's account in the *Bellum Iugurthinum*, in simple huts rather than elaborate fixed buildings (*proximis nullae quidem urbes stant, tamen domicilia sunt quae mapalia appellantur*, 1.41). Those who reside a little further into the interior abandon these primitive abodes entirely

⁴⁹ See above, p. 125.

⁵⁰ On Mela's particular interest in and emphasis on Africa as a continent full of ethnographic extremes in the *Chorographia* see Evans (1999).

for a nomadic lifestyle, opting instead to follow their flocks around day by day (*interiores incultius etiam secuntur uagi pecora, utque ea pabulo ducta sunt ita se ac tuguria sua promouent, atque ubi dies deficit ibi noctem agunt*, 1.42). After describing these African nomads, Mela moves to the distant reaches of Africa beyond the desert, a space which provides a home to a series of tribes with increasingly odd customs, such as the Atlantes who curse the sun and do not dream like other mortals (*ex his qui ultra deserta esse memorantur Atlantes solem exsecrantur ... neque illis in quiete qualia ceteris mortalibus uisere datur*, 1.43), the cave-dwelling and snake-nurtured Trogodytae who hiss rather than talk (*Trogodytae ... strident magis quam locuntur, specus subeunt alunturque serpentibus*, 1.44), the Garamantes who practise polygamy and shepherd flocks of herd animals which must eat with their necks at a strange angle to overcome their large horns (*apud Garamantas etiam armenta sunt eaque obliqua ceruice pascuntur, nam pronis directa in humum cornua efficiunt. nulli certa uxor est*, 1.45), the Augilae who worship the spirits of the dead as gods (*Augilae manes tantum deos putant, per eos deierant, eos ut oracula consulunt, precatique quae uolunt*, 1.46), and finally the Gamphasantes who go naked, have no knowledge of weapons, and ignore all other people (*nudi sunt Gamphasantes armorumque omnium ignari ... neque aliorum quam quibus idem ingenii est aut congressus aut conloquia patiuntur*, 1.47). But all of these fantastic tribes are surpassed in strangeness by Mela's final description of the furthest peoples of Africa, who all possess non-human forms: first the Blemyes, who lack heads and have faces in their chests, then the Satyrs, who possess humanoid faces but no other human features, and finally the Goat-Pans, who are similarly non-human in form (*Blemyis capita absunt, uultus in pectore est. Satyris praeter effigiem nihil humani. Aegipanum quae celebratur ea forma est*, 1.48).

Mela's description of African tribes, with its escalating sense of unfamiliarity and strangeness, demonstrates that the natural next step in ethnographic descriptions of distant spaces is to describe the semi-human and/or semi-mythical peoples who inhabit the most distant possible regions next to Ocean and the edges of the earth.⁵¹ Tacitus' description of the exceedingly ferocious Fenni, the tribe furthest from conventionally civilised human norms and nearest to Germania's distant northern shore, presents us with an image of a people already tending towards this status in terms of uncivilised cultural norms and behaviour. At this point in the *Germania* the reader might therefore expect Tacitus to continue his account of the most distant Germanic tribes by going on to describe increasingly less human or semi-mythical peoples. The work's final sentence, however, quickly shuts down the possibility of this kind of ethnographic closure as Tacitus draws an abrupt stop to his account by

⁵¹ For another Roman account of such peoples at the edges of the earth see Pliny *HN* 7.6–32; cf. Gellius *NA* 9.4 which adapts Pliny's account.

resolutely refusing to venture into the realm of the fantastic with these closing words (46.4):

cetera iam fabulosa: Hellusios et Oxionas ora hominum uultusque, corpora atque artus ferarum gerere: quod ego ut incompertum in medium relinquam.

The rest is fabulous: that the Helusii and the Oxiones bear human faces and expressions and the bodies and limbs of wild animals—as something unproven, I shall leave it open.

For Tacitus, admitting tribes with hybrid forms into his real-life ethnographic scheme is a step too far. Although the behaviour of the Fenni, the *Germania's* final and most savage tribe, is described as quasi-animalistic, the people of this tribe remain firmly human in terms of their physical form: extreme distance from the Mediterranean and proximity to the furthest boundaries of the known world account for their extreme cultural difference, but do not lead to a profound change in their physical characteristics. The far-distant, half-human, half-animal tribes which are often said to occupy the spaces nearest to the edges of the earth in many previous texts of the Greek and Roman ethnographic tradition have no place at all in the *Germania*: these types of people are swiftly labelled as *fabulosa*.

Tacitus' use of *fabulosus*, for only the second time in the work, places this kind of ethnographic material firmly in the realm of the fictional. His first use of the adjective was the reference at 3.2 to the supposed actions of Ulysses in *Germania* during his *fabulosus error*. Just as Tacitus draws firm boundaries around his method and content in relation to fantastic mythical material at the opening of his work, so too does he draw hard limits concerning the type of ethnographic material he is willing to include at its end. Once again, this point-blank refusal to wander into the realm of the fantastic and fictional situates *Germania* as a space which is potentially concretely knowable, and therefore potentially conquerable. Certain Germanic tribes may behave in ways which are unusual or unexpected, but there is nothing fundamentally incomprehensible about these peoples or their land. In fact, as the catalogue of tribes in the second half of the work suggests, it is possible to arrange, order and structure *Germania* and its inhabitants in a form which allows Romans to map each people and their specific cultural attributes in relation to one another.⁵²

⁵² Tacitus' ability to discuss and order *Germania's* tribes, at least in relation to one another, reveals that the space and its peoples have already started to be ordered and controlled from a Roman point of view, and suggests that *Germania* as a whole is not as unmappable and consequently unconquerable as has been suggested by Tan (2014) 199–202 and Van Broeck (2018) 201–29.

Naturally, given the strong link between distance from Rome and relative lack of familiarity, the tribes nearest to the edges of the earth are more difficult to define and understand properly. For example, Tacitus is not entirely sure whether the Fenni and two other nearby tribes, the Peucini and Venethi, should properly be called Germani at all, since they may actually be Sarmatians (*Peucinorum Venethorumque et Fennorum nationes Germanis an Sarmatis ascribam dubito*, 46.1). But even when it comes to these most distant tribes, Tacitus is nonetheless able both to give a detailed description of their culture and behaviour and to situate these peoples in relation to the rest of the Germani in a manner that makes clear that there is nothing fundamentally mythical or fictional about them.⁵³ The Germani are certainly very different culturally from the Romans from the outset of the *Germania*, and the closer one moves towards the furthest northern boundary of the world, the more peculiar and difficult to define wholly each tribe becomes. But there is no suggestion in Tacitus' work that Germania presents a space which it is impossible to understand fairly accurately in this period.

4. Conclusion: Delimiting Germania

The presentation of Germania as a space which, although distinctly other and distant from the Mediterranean world, is nevertheless understandable, comprehensible, and orderable from a Roman point of view is one crucial effect of Tacitus' careful and simultaneous drawing of the boundaries of both the territory across the Rhine and his own geographical discourse. While the furthest reaches of Germanic territory certainly continue to provide the Roman reader with the most extreme examples of otherness, especially when Tacitus reaches his descriptions of tribes such as the Peucini, Venethi, and Fenni, there is nevertheless nothing inherently improbable or particularly impossible, mythical, or fantastic about even the most distant of the region's spaces. The Germani are shown to remain free of extensive Roman contact and control at the moment of Tacitus' writing, but his firm refutation of the *fabulosum* at the open and close of the *Germania* ensures that the region is positioned as a firmly graspable space, territory which is already to some extent known to the Romans and which could—and probably should—be comprehensively conquered in the future.⁵⁴

⁵³ On Tacitus' doubt about the status of these final tribes, and its relation to the fact that his work is reaching its own limits at this point in the *Germania*, see O'Gorman (2012) 96–7, 116 and Woolf (2011) 102

⁵⁴ On the *Germania* as an expression of Roman textual and symbolic control of Germanic space which suggests that this territory is there to be taken comprehensively in reality see Rives (1999) 55–6 and Krebs (2011) 210. Cf. Tan (2014) 199–202 and Van Broeck (2018) 201–29, who both argue against the notion of Roman textual and symbolic control and consider

The effect of Tacitus' careful delineation of Germania's limits is most obvious if we return briefly once again to the *Bellum Gallicum* and consider Tacitus' presentation of geography of the region in relation to what Krebs has recently termed Caesar's 'imaginary geography of Germany'.⁵⁵ As mentioned at the start, Caesar is careful throughout the *BG* not only to present the Rhine as a hard border separating Germania from Gaul both geographically and culturally, but also simultaneously to suggest that this region is immeasurable, unmappable, and therefore unconquerable.⁵⁶ These specific aspects of Caesar's portrayal of Germania are nowhere more apparent than in his famous ethnographic excursus on the region in Book 6 of his work (6.21–8). Here the unruly and immeasurable nature of Germania is especially evident in the description of the seemingly boundless Hercynian forest, the breadth of which can only be measured in approximate terms because the Germani have no means to measure journeys (*huius Hercyniae siluae, quae supra demonstrata est, latitudo nouem dierum iter expedito patet. non enim aliter finiri potest neque mensuras itinerum nouerunt*, 6.25), and which no man has yet found the origin of or traversed completely due to its magnitude (*neque quisquam est huius Germaniae, qui se [aut audisse] aut adisse ad initium eius siluae dicat, cum dierum iter LX processerit, aut quo ex loco oriatur, acceperit*, 6.25). The sense of unfamiliarity and strangeness created by the immeasurability and boundlessness of the Germanic interior is further compounded by the ethnographic description of its unique fauna, which Caesar records in order to emphasise the extremity of the region's otherness and difference from both Gaul and the rest of the world (*multaque in ea genera ferarum nasci constat, quae reliquis in locis uisa non sint, ex quibus, quae maxime differant*

Germania to be a fundamentally incomprehensible, and therefore unconquerable space in Tacitus' text. On the connection between Roman knowledge, intellectual conquest and physical conquest in the *Agricola* see Clarke (2012) 40–1, 49–50.

⁵⁵ For the phrase see Krebs (2006) 127: 'Caesar's refusal to give any account of distances beyond the Rhine makes a geographical comprehension impossible. The infinite and undefined geographical space is a constitutive part of his imaginary geography of Germany: there the *imperator* yields to nature rather than nature to him, and the reader is left equally baffled by the space'.

⁵⁶ See above, p. 117 n. 5 on Caesar's presentation of the Rhine as a hard geographical and cultural border. On the featureless, unlimited, indefinite, and immeasurable nature of the interior of Germania in Caesar's *BG* see, e.g., Krebs (2006) 112, 121–4, Riggsby (2006) 61–2, id. (2018) 71, 73, Schadee (2008) 178–9, Allen-Hornblower (2014) 687, and Johnston (2018) 90. As Krebs (2006) 127–32 points out, the presentation of Germania as a featureless landscape full of nomadic tribes in which it is difficult for outsiders to orient themselves is similar to Herodotus' representation of Scythia and Scythian nomads in *Histories* 4 (see also Purves (2006) on the unmappable nature of Scythia in Herodotus). Van Broeck (2018) 201–29 argues that such fluidity and amorphism is also a feature of Tacitus' representation of the region in the *Germania*, but in comparison to Caesar's presentation of the same region in the *BG*, Tacitus' representation of the space and the relationships between its various tribes is significantly more ordered, detailed, finite, and delimited.

a ceteris et memoriae prodenda uideantur, haec sunt, 6.25). The examples of unusual animals which Caesar goes on to give—such as knee-less elks which are caught when young Germani undermine the roots of trees and wait for the animals to lean against them and fall down along with the foliage, rendering them unable to right themselves (*omnes eo loco aut ab radicibus subruunt aut accidunt arbores, tantum ut summa species earum stantium relinquatur. huc cum se consuetudine reclinauerunt, infirmas arbores pondere adfligunt atque una ipsae concidunt*, 6.27), and unicorn oxen with massive branching horns (*est bos cerui figura, cuius a media fronte inter aures unum cornu existit excelsius magisque directum his, quae nobis nota sunt, cornibus; ab eius summo sicut palmae ramique late diffunduntur*, 6.26)—are typical of the accounts of zoological marvels associated with far-distant lands in the Greek tradition of paradoxography and ethnography.⁵⁷ For Caesar, the ethnographic *topoi* associated with the distant, unmapped, and confusing spaces of the edges of the earth are the most natural form of discourse when it comes to conveying the reality of Germania as a space to his reader, even in spite of his autoptic witnessing of the region's interior. Like Tacitus' account of the autoptic witnessing and subsequent fantastic reports of Germanicus' men in Ocean in *Annals* 2, Caesar's autopsy of the land across the Rhine does not automatically and immediately result in an ability to understand, order, and conquer this territory. When it comes to Germania, the fact that he came, saw, and yet very much did not conquer this region is made clear by the manner in which the ethnographic description contributes to a continued conception of its inner immeasurability and essential strangeness.⁵⁸

Tacitus' ethnographic treatment contrasts with Caesar's. Germania is certainly a space of otherness and difference, but it is no longer a fundamentally unknowable, unmappable, or unobtainable region. Tacitus' careful positioning of both the geographical boundaries of the region and of his own writing at the beginning and end of the work demonstrate that, however strange the Germani may seem in many cultural respects, Germania is firmly part of the known world—neither the sort of mythical and fictional space at or beyond the edges of the earth in which Homer might have situated Ulysses during his wanderings, nor the type of land full of completely improbable semi-human tribes or totally fabulous zoological marvels familiar from the Greek

⁵⁷ See Schadee (2008) 178–9 on Caesar's exceptional animals and conventional descriptions of the peoples and creatures situated at the edges of the earth. On ethnographic *thaumata* within the German ethnography in Book 6, which constitute the only example of such in the entire *BG*, see Riggsby (2006) 70; on Caesar's elks and the basis of his description of such creatures see Aili (1995).

⁵⁸ See especially Allen-Hornblower (2014) 688–93 on Caesar's portrayal of Germania at *BG* 6.21–8 as a 'fantasy world' which is both unknowable and strange; cf. Schadee (2008) 158–80 on differences in levels of inquiry and knowledge in the *BG* and Germania's status in the work as an explorable and yet unknowable, and therefore unconquerable, space.

and Roman ethnography of the past. Tacitus' careful drawing of these particular boundaries has two fundamental effects. First, it demonstrates his own limits when it comes to geography and ethnography, revealing a desire to remain firmly in the realm of the historical and geographical truth as opposed to blurring the boundaries between myth, fantastic ethnography, and fiction. Second, this in turn reinforces the contention that the entirety of Germania and its most distant spaces, although they have thus far remained fundamentally free from lasting Roman control, are potentially assailable and available in the future. The act of revealing the Germani to the reader by describing, ordering and cataloguing the region's geographical features, customs, and peoples demonstrates how significant Roman campaigning had already been in terms of increasing knowledge and familiarity of the territory and its tribes—something which we are, after all, reminded of at the end of the work's very first sentence (*nuper cognitis quibusdam gentibus ac regibus, quos bellum aperuit*, 1.1). This increased knowledge and familiarity naturally leads Tacitus to adopt an approach that differs substantially from that found in Caesar's ethnographic account of his own early autoptic witnessing of the areas across the Rhine. Caesar's vision of Germania, created through a combination of genuine relative unfamiliarity and political expediency, dictated that the interior of the region should be presented as a fantastic, unknowable and unconquerable space. In contrast, Tacitus' *Germania* presents us with a very different yet equally careful act of positioning and boundary-drawing in its opening and closing chapters: an act of delimitation which holds up the entire region as the ultimate possible—and obtainable—goal of further increased Roman knowledge and subsequent imperial expansion. The Germani are as extreme as it is possible to get, both epistemically and geographically—but they are potentially reachable none the less.

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