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**Reimagining Germania: Competing Appropriations of Tacitus'  
Germania by humanists Enea Silvio Piccolomini and Conrad Celtis**  
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# Reimagining Germania

Competing Appropriations of Tacitus' *Germania* by humanists Enea  
Silvio Piccolomini and Conrad Celtis

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## INTRODUCTION

*Sic uelis nostras rogitamus oras Italas ceu quondam aditare terras, Barbarus sermo fugiatque, ut atrum subruat omne.*<sup>1</sup>

Renaissance humanism was marked by intense competition and rivalry. Internal disputes were common, as each humanist author strove to be the most erudite and learned of his companions. In polemical texts they challenged each other as they were defining what a true humanist should be. This creating of an ingroup of humanists as opposed to an outgroup of non-humanists was messy, and it did not stay in Italy, the so-called cradle of the Renaissance. Soon after its spread throughout Europe, German humanists entered the scene and started challenging the authority of Italian humanists: was Italy the rightful heir to antiquity?

German humanists argued for the *translatio imperii* and *studii* from Italy to Germany. The political power had already in the past travelled from Italy to Germany, namely through the transition from the Roman Empire to the Holy Roman Empire. What was yet to be achieved, was the *translatio studii*.<sup>2</sup> In the quote above German arch-humanist Conrad Celtis prays for the coming of Apollo to Germany. Despite all these efforts, the Italians had one thing that the Germans did not. Italian humanists based their superiority in the field of antiquity on their direct connectedness to ancient Rome. The Germans lacked such a glorious past. Ironically, it was the Italian humanist Enea Silvio Piccolomini (later pope Pius II) who provided them with an ancient past: he connected the contemporary Germans with the ancient Germani. Although incorrect, this idea of ethnic continuity from the Germani to the Germans was enthusiastically used by Germans from its discovery in the 15<sup>th</sup> century into the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>3</sup>

However, Enea Silvio's treatment of these ancient Germani was all but friendly. He portrayed them as uncivilized barbarians, reinforcing the idea of Italian superiority. For his portrayal of the Germani he used ancient sources, like the recently re-discovered *Germania* by Tacitus. German humanists soon realised the value of this work, which was lovingly called their *aureus libellus*. Led by figures like Conrad Celtis, they reclaimed the *Germania* and transformed it into a source of pride.

### 1. Tacitus' *Germania* (*De origine et situ Germanorum*)

Cornelius Tacitus (c. 55 – c. 120) was active as a Roman historian during a period of twenty years, starting in the year 98.<sup>4</sup> He first wrote his opera minora: *Agricola*, *Germania* and

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<sup>1</sup> Conrad Celtis, *Ode* 4.5.21-24 (Ed. Forster). Translation: We pray that you come to our shores just as you once came to the Italian lands, may Barbarian speech flee, and may the whole of darkness break down. Translations, here and elsewhere, are my own.

<sup>2</sup> De Beer 2020: 13-21. Susanna de Beer proposes that the German Renaissance relates to the Italian Renaissance through relocation, contestation and imitation of the latter, since it was impossible for German humanists to directly copy-past the Italian Renaissance due to its Rome-centredness.

<sup>3</sup> The *Germania* continued to be an important work for Germans in the centuries following its rediscovery in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. The idea of an ethnic continuity from the ancient Germani to the Germans was an important component of the German nationalist movement, which reached its summit in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The 'Germanomania' of the 19<sup>th</sup> century continued into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the run-up to and during the national-socialist regime the *Germania* was exploited for ideological and racist theories. See: Krebs 2010.

<sup>4</sup> Flaig & Franke 2006.

*Dialogus*. These were followed by the *Histories* and the *Annals*. Although some historians before him had written about the area northwest of the Rhine, Tacitus was the only Roman author to write a monograph on Germania.<sup>5</sup> However, it is very unlikely that Tacitus ever visited this region himself. He consulted earlier books by Roman historians and supplemented this information with intel from soldiers and merchants.<sup>6</sup> Caesar had been the first to describe the Germani as if they were one people. Tacitus' *Germania* consists of two parts. Books 1-27.1 contain an ethnographical description of the Germani and Germania, presented as one single ethnographic unity, following Caesar. In books 27.2-46 Tacitus counters this idea of unity, as he zooms in on the different tribes and regions.<sup>7</sup> He celebrates the intertribal hatred, since this could be the only thing keeping the Germani from collectively fighting against the Romans: “*maneant, quaeso, duretque gentibus, si non amor nostri, at certe odium sui*” (may it last, I pray, and persist among the tribes, if not love for us, then surely hate for each other).<sup>8</sup> Even without unity the Germani had triumphed against the Romans for over 210 years.<sup>9</sup> That the Germani were in fact still free from Roman rule was important for Tacitus to highlight, going against propaganda issued by emperor Domitianus claiming that Germania had been captured.<sup>10</sup>

The political notions in the work are abundant. Warning Rome of the possible threat the Germani could become in the future was just one side of the story. A recurring theme in Tacitus' story is formed by a series of implied contradictions between the Romans and the Germani. Tacitus juxtaposes the virtue of the primitive Germani to the moral looseness of the Romans.<sup>11</sup> He hereby criticizes the Romans more than he praises the Germani – as Mellor (1999) argues: “[...] his central purpose was not to praise Germany so much as to criticize Roman morality and political life through the implied comparison.”<sup>12</sup>

Already in late antiquity Tacitus was losing popularity. Only few references and quotations of his work occur in the four centuries following the time of writing.<sup>13</sup> He was very unpopular with the Christian writers of late antiquity, and he disappeared completely for a big part of the Middle Ages.<sup>14</sup> In the time of the early Renaissance manuscript-hunters Tacitus resurfaced. Some unknown works of Cornelius Tacitus appeared on Poggio Bracciolini's radar in 1425. He informs his friend Niccolò Niccoli in a letter of these “*aliqua opera Cornelii Taciti nobis*

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<sup>5</sup> According to Mellor (1999: 79) even “the only purely ethnographic monograph that survives from antiquity.”

<sup>6</sup> Thomas 2010: 59. Textual sources: Posidonius, Julius Caesar, Livy and Pliny the Elder.

<sup>7</sup> Thomas 2010: 60-61.

<sup>8</sup> Tac. Ger. 33.2.

<sup>9</sup> Tac. Ger. 37.2: [...] *ducenti ferme et decem anni colliguntur: tam diu Germania vincitur* (a total of about 210 years: for so long, Germania has been the object of conquest). In his commentary Lund (1988: 207) writes: “der Imperfektive Aspekt des Tempus praesens besagt, daß die Römer vergeblich Germanien zu erobern versucht haben.”

<sup>10</sup> Flaig & Franke 2006.

<sup>11</sup> Krebs 2010: 37. McDonald 2025.

<sup>12</sup> Mellor 1999: 79.

<sup>13</sup> Martin 2010: 241. For example, in the late fourth century Ammianus Marcellinus announced himself the successor of Tacitus, starting his work where Tacitus had left off. Martin (2010: 241) refers to this as “the only significant sign of a Tacitean influence in this period.”

<sup>14</sup> Mellor (1999: 76) states that Tacitus was “virtually unknown in the Middle Ages.” But: Krebs (2010: 53-56) describes the important role played by Rudolf of Fulda in the 9<sup>th</sup> century. In the library of the monastery in Fulda a very rare manuscript of Tacitus' *Germania* was to be found. Rudolf used several chapters of the *Germania* in a description of the pagan history of the Saxons. After this very early reception of Tacitus, we can find snippets of the *Germania* in some works in the following centuries, until its ‘re-discovery’ in the Renaissance.

*ignota*.”<sup>15</sup> Both have pursued these works for years, but without success. Thirty years after their search began, Pier Candido Decembrio claims to have seen the *Germania* in Rome. It is unclear how exactly a manuscript with Tacitus’ opera minora arrived in Rome, but by the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century the three works were copied several times and thus known among the Italian humanists.<sup>16</sup> It was through them that the *Germania* eventually found its way to Germany.

## 2. The *Germania* in the early modern period

From the very start of its reception in the early modern period, the *Germania* was used in rhetorical contexts. The work first reached Germany through a prominent Italian humanist: Enea Silvio Piccolomini. He had spent a total of 23 years in Germany, serving Frederick III, among others.<sup>17</sup> When in 1457 Enea received a letter from Martin Maier, chancellor of Mainz, in which he criticized the mishandling of the German nation by the Christian church, he struck back harshly. Enea elaborately defended himself and the church against Maier’s accusations in a set of letters.<sup>18</sup> This work was later published as the *De ritu, situ, moribus et conditione Germaniae descriptio*, or in short the *Germania*. His main argument in this treatise is that without the Roman church the Germans would still be the same barbarians they were in ancient times: the church had saved them from barbarism and consequently Germany had evolved into a great nation.<sup>19</sup> For his portrayal of the Germani as barbarians, he makes extensive use of Tacitus’ *Germania*.<sup>20</sup> In describing the Germani, he focuses solely on their barbaric characteristics, completely ignoring all positive aspects of Tacitus’s description. He wanted to create an image of the classic barbarian.<sup>21</sup>

Enea’s provocative statements did not go unanswered. German humanists delved into the *Germania* to defend themselves and found a completely different picture than the one he had painted. Although the rebirth of Tacitus in the 15<sup>th</sup> century was achieved by Italian humanists like Enea Silvio Piccolomini, in the 16<sup>th</sup> century he was established by German humanists as *Noster Tacitus*.<sup>22</sup> Among others, Jakob Wimpheling, Beatus Rhenanus, Andreas Althamer and Conrad Celtis responded to the invective by Enea Silvio in their own works. They followed Enea by comparing *Germania antiqua* and *Germania nova* and they stayed close to Tacitus’ method by comparing Germania and Rome.<sup>23</sup> This antagonism between Germany and Italy is very prominent in the work of Conrad Celtis. He fights to create a place for Germany in the

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<sup>15</sup> Poggio Bracciolini, *Epistolae* 2.34 (Ed. Tonelli). In: Krebs 2010: 61.

<sup>16</sup> Martin 2011: 246.

<sup>17</sup> Krebs 2005: 118.

<sup>18</sup> Krebs 2005: 139. Enea Silvio had answered Martin Maier in private correspondence, dated 8 August, 20 September and 20 October 1457. The treatise he later published is an imagined correspondence, based on these previous letters.

<sup>19</sup> Krebs 2010: 80-81.

<sup>20</sup> For an elaborate discussion of if, when, and how Enea Silvio came into contact with the *Germania*, see: Krebs 2005: 120-127. Krebs argues that Enea Silvio must have seen the *Germania*: “Die inhaltlichen Anklänge, die Zusammenstellung nicht unmittelbar zusammenhängender Charakteristika und der Umstand, daß das, wessen Enea Silvio sich erinnert, ihm als einem der größten Redner seiner Zeit infolge der augenfälligen Stilisierung besonders einprägsam erscheinen mußte, sowie schließlich der Unterschied zwischen Brief und Brieftraktat scheinen für Enea Silvios Lektüre der taciteischen *Germania* zu sprechen (126-127).”

<sup>21</sup> Krebs 2005: 142-145.

<sup>22</sup> Kelly 2014: 154. In his study of Tacitus’ *Germania* from 1529 German humanist Andreas Althamer referred to Tacitus as *noster Tacitus*, *Cornelius noster* (our Tacitus, our Cornelius).

<sup>23</sup> Kelly 2014: 157.

humanistic discourse, and even to take over the hegemony from Italian humanists.<sup>24</sup> Celtis' work has been extremely influential in the discourse on Tacitus' *Germania* and the ancient history of the German people.<sup>25</sup>

### 3. Historiography

Research on the reception of Tacitus' *Germania* by Italian and German humanists began with Felice Ramorino in 1898, who studied the influence of the *Germania* on Italian humanist literature.<sup>26</sup> He was soon followed by Paul Joachimsen, who expanded the scope of inquiry to include German humanists. In his innovative article *Tacitus im deutschen Humanismus*, Joachimsen first outlines the re-discovery of Tacitus' works, then explores their reception among Italian humanists such as Enea Silvio Piccolomini and Giannantonio Campano, and finally among German humanists, including Conrad Celtis, Johannes Aventinus, Beatus Rhenanus, and Ulrich von Hutten.<sup>27</sup>

More recently, Gernot Michael Müller (2001), Dieter Mertens (2004) and Christopher Krebs (2005/10) have contributed significantly to this field.<sup>28</sup> Müller produced a comprehensive study of Celtis' *Germania generalis*, providing a critical edition, translation, and extensive commentary. Mertens, in a substantial chapter titled *Die Instrumentalisierung der „Germania“ des Tacitus durch die deutschen Humanisten*, traces the phases of Tacitus' reception from the Middle Ages to German humanism, arguing that Tacitus went from the margins in the Middle Ages to a huge authority on the history of the Germans in the late 15<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>29</sup>

Christopher Krebs has produced two influential works on the reception of Tacitus – and especially of his *Germania* – in the early modern period. In his 2005 study *Negotatio Germaniae: Tacitus Germania und Enea Silvio Piccolomini, Giannantonio Campano, Conrad Celtis und Heinrich Bebel* (2005) Krebs analyses how Tacitus constructed the *imago Germaniae*, and how this *imago* was received and adapted by Italian and German humanists.<sup>30</sup> His study offers a nuanced account of how these four humanists used the *Germania* in ambivalent ways to create images of ancient Germania and contemporary Germany to fit their agendas. Five years later, in a broader work on the *Germania's* reception from the late 14<sup>th</sup> into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Krebs turns particular attention to the text's appropriation by Nazi-ideology.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Krebs 2005: 193.

<sup>25</sup> Krebs 2005: 194.

<sup>26</sup> Ramorino, F. 1898. *Cornelio Tacito nella storia della cultura*. Rome.

<sup>27</sup> Joachimsen, P. 1911. 'Tacitus im deutschen Humanismus.' *Neue Jahrbücher für das klassische Altertum*, 14, 697-717. After Joachimsen, many similar studies followed, of which the two most influential ones were Ridé (1977) and Krapf (1979).

<sup>28</sup> Mertens, D. 2004. 'Die Instrumentalisierung der „Germania“ des Tacitus durch die deutschen Humanisten,' in: H. Beck, D. Geuenich, H. Steuer & D. Hakelberg (Eds), *Zur Geschichte der Gleichung „germanisch-deutsch“*. Berlin/Boston, 37-102.

<sup>29</sup> Mertens 2004: 101.

<sup>30</sup> Krebs, C. 2005. *Negotatio Germaniae: Tacitus' Germania und Enea Silvio Piccolomini, Giannantonio Campano, Conrad Celtis und Heinrich Bebel*. Hypomnemata, Bd. 158. Göttingen.

<sup>31</sup> Krebs, C. 2010. *A most dangerous book. Tacitus' Germania from the Roman Empire to the Third Reich*. Christopher Krebs. New York.

#### 4. Research question and structure

In this thesis, I will further explore the role of Tacitus' *Germania* in the intellectual debate between German and Italian humanists in the early modern period. I will focus on the intellectual battle that emerged between these two groups, in which they both strategically employed the *Germania* as a rhetorical tool to construct competing narratives of identity. The *Germania* was constantly being reinterpreted to serve different ideological purposes. My analysis will consist of a comparative study of the *Germania* by Enea Silvio Piccolomini and the *Germania generalis* and the *Oratio in Gymnasio in Ingelstadio publice recitata* by Conrad Celtis. I will use the concept of 'othering' to identify how both humanists engaged with Tacitus' *Germania* to position themselves in the discourse as opposed to the other.

This study will be guided by the following research question: How did Enea Silvio Piccolomini and Conrad Celtis use Tacitus' *Germania* to construct competing visions of ancient Germania and the German cultural position in early modern Europe? To adequately answer this question I will in separate chapters look at the way Piccolomini and Celtis interpret and employ Tacitus' *Germania* in their writings. In the first chapter, an analysis of relevant passages of Enea's *Germania* will show how he uses Tacitus' *Germania* to reinforce Italian superiority and frame the Germans as barbarians. The second chapter will focus on the response by Conrad Celtis on this Italian notion of superiority and the barbarisation of the Germans by Enea. In this chapter an analysis of relevant passages of Conrad Celtis' *Germania generalis* and his *Oratio in Gymnasio in Ingelstadio publice recitata* will show how he responds to these allegations and instead uses the *Germania* to create a more positive German identity in contrast to the Italians. By comparing the two authors, I will highlight the mechanics through which the *Germania* was transformed from a Roman ethnographic account into a political text.

#### 5. Theoretical framework and methodology

This study draws on the concept of 'othering'. By employing Tacitus' *Germania*, both Enea Silvio Piccolomini and Conrad Celtis engaged in a dynamic process of othering, constructing contrasting narratives that served their respective agendas. The concept of othering, which emerged during the postmodern era and is primarily associated with postcolonialism-studies, describes the process of defining an in-group by distinguishing it from an out-group. This study adopts the following definition of othering: "Othering is the process of creating a distinction between an in-group and an out-group by emphasizing differences, leading to the stigmatization of the out-group based on stereotypes and hierarchies, ultimately reinforcing the identity of the in-group."<sup>32</sup> An in-group can only exist because of the existence of the out-group: the Self only exists in relation to the Other.<sup>33</sup> Having a communal enemy or rival plays a crucial role in community building and identity formation. One can be a part of multiple in-groups. In the Renaissance, rivalries between humanists from different places – not only different countries, but also different cities in Italy – often resulted in the writing of invectives.<sup>34</sup> The beforementioned conflict between German and Italian humanists falls into this category of internal strife within the humanist community.

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<sup>32</sup> Definition according to the International Encyclopedia of Human Geography (2009).

<sup>33</sup> Staszak 2020: 25.

<sup>34</sup> Hirschi 2011: 143. Israel, Kraus & Sasso 2021: 1-2.

Methodologically, I will employ a comparative textual analysis to examine how Enea Silvio and Conrad Celtis used the *Germania* to support and create their narratives. Relevant text passages will be close read and analysed. For Enea, focus will be on some key passages in which he adapts Tacitus' descriptions to fit his polemical purposes. For Conrad Celtis, I will explore how he responds to these polemics and instead uses Tacitus to create a positive image. Beyond textual analysis, in this study I will take into account the historical context of the authors and situate their interpretations of the *Germania* within the humanist debates of this period. This research contributes to understanding how classical texts shape intellectual debates and identity formation. By following the reception of *Germania* in the early modern period, this study demonstrates how ancient sources adapt to different cultural and national narratives. Tacitus' *Germania* is a striking example of historical literature's ability to be repurposed over time, acquiring new significance depending on the socio-political contexts in which it is interpreted.

## CHAPTER 1: ENEA SILVIO PICCOLOMINI'S *GERMANIA*

### 1. A short biography: Enea Silvio Piccolomini

Enea Silvio Piccolomini was born on 18 October 1405 in Corsignano, a town near Siena, Italy.<sup>35</sup> He was born into one of the noble families of Siena, which had lost most of its privileges and richness after the democratization of Siena. Despite these circumstances Enea was able to study in Siena and in Florence due to the benevolence of some richer family members. He devoted himself to the humanistic studies and excelled in Latin and rhetoric. On 19 August 1458 Enea was elected as pope Pius II, but his route to the pontificate was not an easy one. He fervently needed his rhetorical skills to smooth out some of the missteps he made during his career and private life.

After his studies, Enea first travelled to Germany as a secretary to the bishop of Fermo, Domenico Capranica. He accompanied him to the Council of Basel, where he lived from 1431 to 1442. After Capranica left the Council, Enea Silvio served a few other leading clergymen. The Council of Basel got into a grave conflict with pope Eugenius IV, which led to the excommunication of its remaining members, including Enea Silvio. He even became secretary to the antipope Felix V. In 1442 he was invited by Frederick III to Vienna, who crowned him as the imperial poet laureate. After his studies Enea had continued writing Latin poetry and had become a renowned poet. Enea's poetry encompasses a wide variety of topics: from the erotic love-poems of his earlier years to the grand autobiographical *Commentaries* that he wrote during his papacy. He published a collection of elegies, epigrams, a novel, satire, and a comedy. However, most of his work was centered on politics, religion, historiography, geography and ethnography.

After becoming poet laureate, Enea became the secretary of Frederick III and in 1445 he broke with the antipope and the Council of Basel. His excommunication was subsequently lifted. This change in loyalty was supported by a change in his personal life. Enea had until then not lived a very pious life, which included fathering two illegitimate children. In 1446 he began his ecclesiastical career as subdeacon and quickly climbed the hierarchical ladder. After being a bishop in Trieste and Sienna he was made cardinal by pope Calixtus III in 1456. In the summer of 1457 Enea Silvio received the two letters from Martin Maier, expressing the German church's growing discontent with the Roman curia. He responded with two letters of his own, dated 8 August and 20 September of the same year. A few months later, in the fall and winter of 1457/58, he devoted himself to develop this private correspondence with Maier into a larger treatise: the *Germania*. It was completed and sent to cardinal Antonio de la Cerda on 1 February 1458. This treatise had a different purpose from his previous letters to Martin Maier – written in a time where pope Calixtus III was on his deathbed, Enea needed to prove himself a proper heir to the papal throne. In the *Germania* he concerns himself with defending the absolute power of the Roman curia and showing off his knowledge of the Bible, which was of importance given his late entry into the church and his morally ambiguous past.

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<sup>35</sup> The following biographical information is based on: Schmidt 1963: 1-8, Weinhardt 2001, Krey & Christianson 2006: 1-58 & Enekel 2013.

Enea eventually succeeded Calixtus III after his death in 1458. As pope Pius II Enea's two main goals were to organize a crusade against the Turks and to rebuild his hometown Corsignano. He passed away in 1464 in Ancona, about to embark on a his long awaited crusade.

## 2. The *Germania*: structure

Enea's *De ritu, situ, moribus et conditione Germaniae descriptio* consists of a feigned letter by Martin Maier, followed by Enea's answer in three books, varying in length and topic. The first book opens with a short introduction in which Enea thanks Martin Mayer for his letter. He refers to him as a dear friend and recalls the good years they have spent together in Lower Austria, of which the letter reminded him.<sup>36</sup> Echoing the twofold structure of Martin Maier's letter, Enea will also divide his reply into two parts: one private, the other political.<sup>37</sup> He begins by addressing the personal message of the letter, in which he congratulates him on his appointment as cardinal. In turn, Enea thanks him for his well wishes but also immediately downplays the praise, asserting that he considers himself too insignificant even for the role of bishop, let alone that of cardinal.<sup>38</sup>

After these formalities Enea Silvio moves on to the core of his response: the rebuttal of the accusations made by Martin Maier to the Roman Curia. He starts by summarizing the main complaints that were passed on in this letter, which largely revolve around financial issues. The German clergy feel like they are being treated unfairly by the Roman Curia, with Rome taking more than its fair share. Beyond this, there are frustrations about the Curia's disregard for the agreements made during the Councils of Konstanz and Basel, the unfair election for ecclesiastical positions, and the widespread sale of indulgences. As Enea presents each of these concerns, he also immediately contests them, defending the Roman Curia against the charges.<sup>39</sup> He is keen to prove that, although the German nation may have suffered harm and loss of power, the fault does not lie with Rome:

Quod siquid detrimenti perpessa est, nihil imputandum esse apostolice sedi manifesta ratione docebimus, cum gloria Germanorum ipsaque vestri populi salus ex Romano solio defluerit.<sup>40</sup>

We will show with clear reasoning that if it [the German nation] has suffered any damage, nothing is to be attributed to the Apostolic See, since the glory of the Germans and the very salvation of your people has flowed forth from the Roman throne.

The second book is occupied with the comparison between old and new Germany. Enea contrasts the very negative image of the barbaric past to the very positive image of the Christian

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<sup>36</sup> Aen. Silv. Germ. 1.0: *Amico suo carissimo* (his very dear friend). Germ. 1.1: *Renovavit enim in animo nostro veteris amicitie suavissimam memoriam, qua diutius in Austria illa inferiori [...] simul unanimes fruebamur* (It has revived in our mind the most pleasant memory of our old friendship, which we harmoniously enjoyed for a long time in Austria inferior).

<sup>37</sup> Enea answers the private part very quickly in book 1.2-3. The rest of the work concerns the political part.

<sup>38</sup> Aen. Silv. Germ. 1.2.

<sup>39</sup> Aen. Silv. Germ. 1.4-1.48.

<sup>40</sup> Aen. Silv. Germ.1.5.

present.<sup>41</sup> The church had not harmed but saved the Germans by introducing them to the Christian faith. He concludes that all the allegations are false, exaggerated, and above all ungrateful. In the third book Enea responds to the final part of Martin's letter, which is 'full of threats' according to Enea.<sup>42</sup> He sets out the aims and plans of the German reformers, which he systematically dismantles in the process. Their main goal is for the German nation to be independent from the Roman curia. This is absolutely reprehensible for Enea. It is not only very ungrateful – it was after all the Roman curia who saved the Germani from their barbaric religion – but also very dangerous for the whole of Christianity.<sup>43</sup>

### 3. *Germania antiqua vs. Germania nova*

Scholars have differed in their assessment of Enea's tone in the *Germania*. Where Voigt (1973) stresses that Enea took care to avoid openly offending his German readers, Krebs (2005) calls Enea's description of ancient Germania "einer Invektive Gegen die germanische Vergangenheit,"<sup>44</sup> Central in the work is the comparison between *Germania antiqua* and *Germania nova*. This comparison is more than a chronological or cultural reflection: it is a rhetorical trope used by Enea to legitimize Roman superiority, while framing the German identity as 'other'. Most scholars have interpreted Enea's comparison between ancient and modern Germany as a stark opposition between a barbaric past and a civilized present.<sup>45</sup> In what follows, I will consider the tone of the *Germania* – is it polemical or not? Moreover, I will argue that the opposition between *Germania antiqua* and *nova* is not as straightforward as it seems, but that Enea Silvio's portrayal of the Germans relies on a more subtle and continuous process of othering, in which Tacitus plays a central role.

Enea begins his comparison at the beginning of the second book, asserting that Germany has never been as rich and powerful as it is now:

Nam neque pauper est Germanica natio neque impotens neque, ut tute ais, ancilla, neque, si sit, Romana curia culpanda est tanquam eius inopie causa. Quod ut manifestius declaremus, ostendendum imprimis est, quenam fuerit olim Germania et que sit hodie.<sup>46</sup>

For the German nation is neither poor, nor powerless, nor – as you say yourself – a slave, and not, even if it were so, would the Roman curia be to blame for the cause of this scarcity. To make this more clear, it must first be shown how Germania once was and how it is today.

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<sup>41</sup> The two parts of this comparison do not get equal attention: the past is described in just a few chapters (1-6), while the description of the present takes up many chapters (7-27).

<sup>42</sup> Aen. Silv. Germ. 3.1: *Minarum plena est ultima pars litterarum tuarum* (The final part of your letter is full of threats).

<sup>43</sup> Aen. Silv. Germ. 3.5-6.

<sup>44</sup> Voigt 1973: 132. Krebs 2005: 156.

<sup>45</sup> Ridé 1977: 179. Müller 2001: 250-257. Krebs 2005: 131-155.

<sup>46</sup> Aen. Silv. Germ. 2.1.

In specifying this Germania of the past Enea does something unexpected. In the complaints of the German clergy is the notion that the once great and powerful German people are now being brought on their knees and forced to beg for money. When referring to the previous greatness of their nation, they are referring to the time of Charlemagne.<sup>47</sup> In order to make his narrative work Enea has to delve deeper into the past. By using ancient Germania as the basis he can argue that German power has not declined, but inclined.<sup>48</sup>

**a. *Germania antiqua*: the barbarian ‘other’**

Enea is forced to start his description of *Germania antiqua* in the time of Julius Caesar, as no information is available about Germania in previous times. He mentions the times of Janus, Saturn, Jupiter, Romulus, Camillus or Alexander the Great:

Repetamus igitur vetusta tempora, non dicimus aut Jani aut Saturni aut Jovis nec rursus aut Romuli aut Camilli vel Alexandri Magni. Quibus regnantibus incompertum nobis est, qualis fuerit Germanie facies.<sup>49</sup>

Let us then revisit ancient times; we do not mean those of Janus or Saturn or Jove, and not those of Romulus or Camillus or Alexander the Great. It is unknown to us what Germania was like during their reigns.

This summation of legendary names from the ancient Roman past and culture, about which an abundance of ancient Greek and Latin literature is available, highlights Germania’s absence from the historical record. Through this deliberate contrast, Enea emphasizes two key points: 1) Germania was insignificant before coming into contact with the Roman world, and 2) Germania brought forth no native authors who took it upon themselves to record its history and culture. This contrast between the richly recorded Roman history and the silence surrounding ancient Germania marginalizes the latter. This marks the start of Enea Silvio’s rhetorical strategy of establishing a fundamental opposition between ‘us’ (the Romans/Italians) and ‘them’ (the Germanics/Germans).

In his portrayal of the ancient Germanic people he emphasizes their barbarity, warlike nature, nomadic lifestyle, and ungodliness. Enea makes no effort to conceal his disdain for *Germania antiqua*, depicting its inhabitants in decidedly negative terms. He asserts that the Germanic tribes possessed neither wealth nor power.<sup>50</sup> Firstly, drawing on Julius Caesar’s writings, Enea writes that they were warlike (*bellicosi*) and skilled with weapons (*in armis*

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<sup>47</sup> Whaley 2011: 17. Classen 2021: 1-5. A myth about Charlemagne was developed throughout the middle ages, becoming a primary figure in fictional texts and historiography as the exemplum of a great emperor and Christian. The idea that the Holy Roman Empire was inherited from Charlemagne – who was seen as a direct successor of the Roman emperors – and that the German kings were in turn his successors, was crucial for the ethos of the Empire.

<sup>48</sup> Ridé (1977: 176-177), Krapf (1998: 51) and Krebs (2005: 142) explain that it is evident that when Martin Maier refers to a glorious past, he is referring to the Holy Roman Empire under Charlemagne. Enea’s choice to interpret the past as antiquity instead is a deliberate choice to support his rhetorical strategy: it is a necessary change to make the desired contrast between then and now work.

<sup>49</sup> Aen. Silv. Germ. 2.2.

<sup>50</sup> Aen. Silv. Germ. 2.2.

*exercitati*); their children were trained from a very young age in hunting and combat.<sup>51</sup> More importantly, they were completely uncivilized:

In fluminibus promiscue se perluisse pellibus animalium pro vestibus usos magna corporis parte nuda.<sup>52</sup>

They bathed in rivers without distinction and used animal skins instead of clothes, while a large part of their bodies were naked.

Enea then turns to his second source: Strabo. He highlights the absence of agriculture among the Germanic peoples. They roamed the land, driven by poverty and scarcity, and their unwillingness to cultivate their lands. Their lifestyle was nomadic and their material possessions minimal.<sup>53</sup>

After Strabo, Enea turns to his most important authority: Cornelius Tacitus, from whom he concludes that the predecessors of the Germans basically lived like wild animals:

Parum quidem ea tempestate a feritate brutorum maiorum tuorum vita distabat.<sup>54</sup>

At that time certainly the life of your ancestors differed little from the savagery of brute beasts.

He repeats the nomadic aspects of the Germanic lifestyle: they were usually shepherds (*pastores*), and lived in the woods (*silvarum*).<sup>55</sup> He then goes on to list a number of things that the Germani did not possess: there were no cities, not even fortified villages, no castles and temples, not even houses, gardens and vineyards. Material wealth was similarly absent. There was no gold or silver, no pearls, gemstones, or luxurious silk clothing.<sup>56</sup> At this point, Enea briefly mentions a rare positive trait of the Germani: they were not consumed by a desire for

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<sup>51</sup> Aen. Silv. Germ. 2.2. Caes. BGall. 6.21: *Vita omnis in venationibus atque studiis rei militaris consistit: a parvis labori ac duritiae student* (Their whole life consists of hunting and military endeavours: from childhood they strive after labour and hardness).

<sup>52</sup> Aen. Silv. Germ. 2.2. Caes., BGall. 6.21: [...] *et promiscue in fluminibus perluuntur et pellibus aut parvis renorum tegimentis utuntur magna corporis parte nuda* (and they bath all together in rivers and they use skins or small pieces of clothing from deer-skin, while the biggest part of their body is naked). It is telling that Enea decides to highlight exactly this line from Caesar's description of the Germani. Even though they dress scarcely and bath without distinction between men and women, Tacitus makes very clear that the Germani are anything but sexually immodest (Tac. Ger. 17-20).

<sup>53</sup> Aen. Silv. Germ. 2.3. Strabo, Geogr. 7.1.3: *κοινὸν δ' ἐστὶν ἅπασιν τοῖς ταύτη τὸ περὶ τὰς μεταναστάσεις εὐμαρὲς διὰ τὴν λιτότητα τοῦ βίου καὶ διὰ τὸ μὴ γεωργεῖν μηδὲ θησαυρίζειν, ἀλλ' ἐν καλυβίοις οἰκεῖν ἐφήμερον ἔχουσι παρασκευὴν* (It is common for all people in this part that migrations are easy because of the simplicity of their life and because they do not cultivate the land and store food, but they live in temporary huts).

<sup>54</sup> Aen. Silv. Germ. 2.4. For a side-by-side overview of similar passages from Enea Silvio's *Germania* and Tacitus' *Germania*, see: Blusch 1983: 99-101.

<sup>55</sup> Aen. Silv. Germ. 2.4.

<sup>56</sup> Tacitus describes these aspect of the Germanic lifestyle in Ger. 5 (natural resources), 16 (housing), and 17 (clothing).

gold.<sup>57</sup> But this positive aspect is immediately overshadowed by what follows. From Tacitus Enea begets not just information about the practicalities of the Germanic lifestyle, but also about their culture, or rather lack thereof. They possessed no writing system, had no knowledge of laws, and did not participate in the noble pursuits of art and science. Moreover, they practiced a horrendous religion, marked by brutal and idolatrous practices. Enea has no doubt that such a corrupted religion also included the practice of human sacrifice:

At in hoc vivendi ritu nulla fuit litterarum cognitio, nulla legum disciplina, nulla bonarum artium studia. Ipsa quoque religio barbara, inepta, idolorum cultrix etque adeo demoniorum illusionibus labefacta, ut humanis sepe hostiis litatum esse apud illos non sit ambiguum. Latrocinia laudi fuerunt, omnia feda, omnia tetra, aspera, barbara et, ut propriis utamur vocabulis, ferina ac brutalia.<sup>58</sup>

But in this way of life, there was no knowledge of letters, no instruction of laws, no pursuit of the fine arts. Even the religion itself was barbarous, improper, worshipping of idols and so corrupted by the deceit of demons, that it is beyond doubt that they often offered human sacrifices. Robberies were celebrated, everything was repulsive, foul, rough, barbarous, and, to use the proper terms, feral and brutal.

In this passage, Enea constructs an image of ancient Germania as a cultural and moral wasteland, marked by a total absence of traits associated with civilization: writing, laws and the arts. Enea emphasizes the absence of these for him important aspects of life by the tripartite construction ‘*nulla...nulla...nulla...*’. Where Tacitus stays relatively nuanced regarding the culture of the Germani – about which he has sometimes negative, sometimes positive things to say – Enea transforms this nuance into complete disgust. Take the lack of laws for example. Tacitus indeed acknowledges the absence of institutionalised laws in Germania, but at the same time he shows admiration for their morals. It is because of these morals that they do not need laws.<sup>59</sup> Enea completely omits this aspect of the story, turning the absence of laws into a mark of barbarism rather than of moral strength.

Enea’s treatment of the Germanic religion likewise builds on Tacitus, but escalates it. Tacitus discusses the Germanic religion in book 9. He gives a short overview of the most important gods and practices, without any implicit moral judgments. For Enea, the religion becomes not just barbarous (*barbara*), but completely foolish (*inepta*) and corrupted by idolatry and demons (*idolorum cultrix etque adeo demoniorum illusionibus labefacta*). In fact, it is so corrupted that Enea is sure (*non sit ambiguum*) that human sacrifices were part of it – definite proof of moral depravity. Enea ends this passage by summarizing the Germanic life with a

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<sup>57</sup> Krebs 2005: 124: “Im düsteren Szenario der Vergangenheit dultet Enea Silvio nur einen abgedunkelten Lichtfleck, d.i. die Sittlichkeit der Germanen, die man loben und der man gegenüber der eigenen auch den Vorzug geben müsse (*laudanda hec et nostris anteferenda moribus*).”

<sup>58</sup> Aen. Silv. Germ. 2.4. Blusch (104) connects these lines to Tacitus’ Ger. 2.2 and 5.1 in which Tacitus uses similar words (*asper* and *foedus*) to describe the German geography; Enea adopts these words, but instead uses them to describe all things German.

<sup>59</sup> Tac. Ger. 19.5: [...] *ibi boni mores valent quam alibi bonae leges* (there good morals are more powerful than good laws elsewhere).

multitude of negative descriptors, of which the last two are especially significant: *'ferina ac brutalia'* suggests that these people are not merely uncivilized, but more beastlike than human.

There are two instances in Tacitus' *Germania* on which Enea bases his accusation of human sacrifice. First, in his discussion of Germanic religion in book 9 he notes that Mercury is honoured with human sacrifices from time to time. Second, in his description of the Semnones, Tacitus mentions a sacred grove in which the tribe periodically offers a human life.<sup>60</sup> Where Tacitus refrains from any harsh judgements about the Germanic religion and relates the two instances of human sacrifices very quickly, Enea goes overboard with negative adjectives. Accusing the other of performing human sacrifices has long served as a powerful rhetorical tool in the construction of the 'other'. Both in antiquity and in later times, portraying foreign peoples or cultural minorities as practitioners of such rituals was a way to mark them as barbarous and dangerous. Human sacrifice stands out as one of the most extreme transgressions of the boundaries of the in-group.<sup>61</sup> In antiquity tales of human sacrifice were used in ethnographical descriptions of foreigners, but also to antagonize political or cultural opponents.<sup>62</sup> Within this well-established tradition, it is not surprising that Enea chooses to highlight this aspect of Tacitus' ethnographical description of Germania.

#### **b. *Germania nova*: the civilizing Romans**

*Germania antiqua* is depicted by Enea as the worst place imaginable – uncultivated, uncivilized, and morally depraved – but there was hope. The Roman conquest of Germania under emperor Hadrian marked the beginning of Germania's transformation:

Talis tua Germania fuit usque ad Adrianum cesarem, quamvis iam cetera orbis provincie excolte artibus ac moribus essent. Sub illo autem imperatore tota Germanica natio in potestatem Romanorum facta est post annos ducentos, quam a Romano primum milite debellari cepta est. Exinde mitior facta civilem cultum accepit.<sup>63</sup>

Such was your Germania until the time of emperor Hadrian, although by then the other parts of the world were already cultivated in the arts and morals. But under that emperor the entire Germanic nation was brought under the power of the Romans, two hundred years after it was first begun to be conquered by the Roman army. From that point, having become more gentle, it embraced civilization.

Enea's claim that the entirety of Germania was conquered by the Romans is simply not true and also deviates from what Tacitus has to say about this. Tacitus narrates the process of the conquering of Germania as a 200-year-long struggle, with wins and losses on both sides.<sup>64</sup> For

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<sup>60</sup> Tac. Ger. 9.1: *Deorum maxime Mercurium colunt, cui certis diebus humanis quoque hostiis litare fas habent* (Of the gods, they worship Mercurius the most, to whom they think it is right to offer human sacrifices on certain days). Tac. Ger. 39.2: *[...] caesoque publice homine celebrant barbari ritus horrenda primordia* (and with publicly killing a human they celebrate the horrifying beginning of their barbarous ceremony).

<sup>61</sup> Harland 2009: 161-162.

<sup>62</sup> Harland 2009: 165.

<sup>63</sup> Aen. Silv. Germ. 2.5.

<sup>64</sup> Tac. Ger. 37.

Enea's story, however, a full conquest is necessary. According to him, it was the Romans who brought civilization and culture to a previously wild people. Until the conquest under emperor Hadrian Germania was the epitome of barbarity, but from the moment (*exinde*) Germania was under Roman rule, the people immediately became more mild and civilized (*mitior facta civilem cultum accepit*). The Germanic people are portrayed not as participants in their own developments, but as dependent on the Romans. A clear power imbalance is established: the Romans are the civilizing force, the *agens*; while the Germanics are the passive recipients of civilization, the *patiens*. This power dynamic, rooted in antiquity, mirrors the relationship Enea perceives between their modern counterparts: just as Germania once needed Rome's guidance, so too, Enea suggests, does modern Germany.

In his description of *Germania nova*, Enea addresses three main themes: first, he gives an elaborate overview of Germany's flourishing cities, second a discussion of its political power, and third, a treatment of the culture. At first glance, Enea's attitude towards *Germania nova* appears very positive, flattering even. However, beneath this surface-level praise lies a condescending undercurrent. Interwoven throughout the positive descriptions are pointed reminders of Germania's barbaric past – rhetorical 'backstabs' that keep the reader aware of Germany's dependence on Roman, and more importantly, Christian civilization. After a discussion of Germany's political strength, Enea turns to culture and education, but not before a stark reminder of just how far the Germans have come since antiquity:

[...] ostendimus monstravimusque in natione tua nec deo verum cultum exhibitum fuisse nec Theutones ad civilitatis usum exercitationem habuisse, qui et vana simulacra colebant liberos suos demoniis immolantes et rapinis cedibusque gaudentes iniuriari vicinis eosque bonis despoliare in laudem trahebant.<sup>65</sup>

[...] we have shown and demonstrated that in your nation neither was true worship offered to God, nor did the Teutons have any experience with civilization; they worshipped vain idols, sacrificed their children to demons, rejoiced in plundering and murder, and considered it praiseworthy to wrong their neighbours and to rob them of their goods.

Yet only a few lines later, Enea proclaims that actually not all traces of barbarism have vanished.<sup>66</sup> Within a single paragraph, he isolates two specific remnants of the old ways:

Et quamvis adhuc veterum nonnulla rapinarum vestigia maneant – nam hoc unum est ex prisca barbarie vitium inter vos relictum –, non tamen ea predarum libertas est, que olim fuit.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Aen. Silv. Germ. 2.27.

<sup>66</sup> Krebs 2005: 151. Krebs compares this negative remark in the otherwise positive tone of the description to the small positive remark on the absence of an obsession with gold in the otherwise negative description of *Germania antiqua*: "Indes, wie im Bild der Vergangenheit Lichtflecken eingeräumt werden mußten, so muß *mutatis mutandis* im Bild der Gegenwart auch Dunkles eingeräumt werden."

<sup>67</sup> Aen. Silv. Germ. 2.27.

And although some traces of the old plundering still remain – since this is the only vice from the ancient barbarism left among you – yet the liberty to plunder is not as it once was.

[...] ut preter sermonem patrium nihil inter vos barbarum remansisse videatur. <sup>68</sup>

[...] except for your native language, nothing barbaric seems to have remained among you.

In one paragraph, Enea goes from recounting (once again) the horrors of ancient Germania to claiming that actually not all barbaric traits have disappeared. The Germans may have been ‘saved’ by the Romans and the Roman church, they can not be equated with the Romans and Italians: they remain the ‘other’.

From chapter 2.29 onwards, Enea shifts focus to the era of Charlemagne. Here, he seeks to explain why Germany’s power has declined since the days of the great emperor – and he is clear that the Roman curia is not to blame. Rather, the Germans themselves are to blame for their own downfall, for a couple of reasons.<sup>69</sup> They did not know how to handle the sudden wealth, something they were not used to. They lack the discipline to obey their emperor, and without the ability to submit, they are unfit to rule others. Finally, Enea blames the impoverishment of the German churches and monasteries on their own extravagance: they squandered their riches on luxury.<sup>70</sup> Again, in the supposed ‘praise’ of *Germania nova* Enea attacks the Germans, reminding them of their inability to prosper.

#### 4. Conclusion

I have argued in this chapter that in *De ritu, situ, moribus et conditione Germaniae descriptio* Enea Silvio Piccolomini constructs a polemical vision of Germany, presenting the German nation as a civilization rescued from severe barbarism by the civilizing forces of the ancient Roman Empire and the Roman curia. The ancient Germani are portrayed as savage, uncultured, and barely human. In this description of the ancient Germani Enea draws on Tacitus’ *Germania*. From this source he carefully selects and amplifies those passages that emphasize violence and barbarity, while ignoring any positive elements that might complicate his image of Germanic barbarism. He makes ancient Germania the dark, uncivilized mirror against which the superior Rome is implicitly contrasted. This narrative creates a clear power imbalance in which the Italians are the creators, and the Germans are the receivers. How genuine, then, is the praise of *Germania nova*, if all credit for its advancement is given to Rome and the Church? Even as he praises *Germania nova*, where cities flourish and Christianity reigns, Enea’s language is laced with condescension and reminders of past savagery, ensuring that the debt of Germany to Rome for its salvation remains undeniable. Enea’s *Germania* thus serves not only as a defence of the

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<sup>68</sup> Aen. Silv. Germ. 2.27.

<sup>69</sup> Krebs 2005: 143.

<sup>70</sup> Aen. Silv. Germ. 2.29-2.34. Germ. 2.34: *Luxuria et ambitio Germanicas ecclesias, non Romana curia exhaurit* (Luxury and ambition have exhausted the German churches, not the Roman curia).

Roman curia against the accusations passed on by Martin Maier, but also reasserts a vision of Italian cultural superiority, during antiquity and the Renaissance alike.

## CHAPTER 2: CONRAD CELTIS'S *GERMANIA*

### 1. A short biography: Conrad Celtis Protucius

Conrad Celtis, born as Konrad Bickel in Wipfeld on 1 February 1459, was the son of a vintner but destined for a different path.<sup>71</sup> Rejecting the prospects of following in his father's footsteps, Conrad fled his hometown at eighteen to pursue learning. His first stop was the University of Cologne, where, to his frustration, they did not offer classes on Latin and rhetoric. After receiving his baccalaureate in 1479, he continued his search for a more humanistic education. In 1484 he was accepted to the University of Heidelberg, where he studied under the eminent humanist Rudolf Agricola, after whose death Conrad left Heidelberg. He embarked on numerous travels throughout Germany, making a living as a teacher and a poet.

In 1487 Conrad's career was richly awarded, when he was crowned poet laureate by emperor Frederick III. In the following summer Conrad was on the move again: the beginning of the 'ten years of wandering' that occupied his life from his crowning in 1487 to settling in Vienna in 1497.<sup>72</sup> His travels took him to Italy, Cracow, Ingolstadt, Nuremberg, Ingolstadt again and Heidelberg. During Conrad's first teaching position at the University of Ingolstadt he set out his ideas on reforming university education during his inaugural speech, which he notably gave right before he left Ingolstadt again. In this speech Conrad fervently tries to encourage his students to devote themselves to the study of the liberal arts and to use their knowledge to preserve the illustrious deeds of the Germans in writing for eternity.

After brief periods of teaching in Ingolstadt and Heidelberg, Conrad finally settled in Vienna in 1497, where he remained until his death in 1508. It was during this final period of Conrad's life that he produced some of his most famous works: his edition of Tacitus' *Germania* complemented with his own *De situ et moribus Germaniae/Germania generalis* (1500), *Quattuor libri amorum* (1502), and *Libri odarum quattuor, cum epodo et saeculari carmine* (published posthumously, 1513). Tacitus' *Germania* had been published in Germany for the first time in 1476. However, twenty years later, after Piccolomini's *Germania* appeared in 1496, it was published for a second time in 1500 by Conrad Celtis. It became immensely popular, leading to a publication of 6000 copies in the following fifty years.<sup>73</sup> Besides publishing his own version of the work, Conrad was the first to teach a series of lectures on Tacitus' *Germania* in a German university.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> The following biographical information is based on: Forster 1948: 96-111, Spitz 1957: 1-71 & Flood 2011: 303-311.

<sup>72</sup> Spitz 1957: 11. Celtis often referred to his 'ten years of wandering' in his works, emphasizing the geographical knowledge he obtained during these years.

<sup>73</sup> Krebs 2010: 82. According to Krebs the re-print of Tacitus' *Germania* in 1500 – four years after the publication of Piccolomini's *Germania* – tells us that the German humanists had read/were familiar with this work.

<sup>74</sup> Spitz 1957: 67. The significance of Celtis publishing and teaching Tacitus' *Germania* was, according to Spitz, not so much in the work itself, as in the time in which it was happening: a time of growing patriotic feeling.

## 2. Conrad Celtis: poet and patriot

A central theme in Conrad's oeuvre is the German empire and people. 'Nationalism' was still in the developmental stages in Conrad's time, but Conrad definitely had a sense of a German 'fatherland' and shared cultural identity. Even though the nation-states of Italy and Germany did not exist yet in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, the idea of the German and the Italian as distinctive categories did exist.<sup>75</sup> Even the learned humanists did not escape the very human-trait of 'othering', as Rowland writes: "the temptation to seek refuge in the simplicity of divisiveness caught the cosmopolitan humanist as well as the unlettered local."<sup>76</sup> National stereotypes were ubiquitous in the international network of humanism. Within these humanist circles, the Italians felt naturally superior to other peoples, including the Germans – as evident in Enea Silvio's *Germania*. The stereotype of the German as a wild barbarian, prone to violence and drunkenness, was prominent in Italian circles. With time, the German stereotype of the Italian was created, centred around sexual deviance, greediness, luxury, and a complete loss of all ancient Roman virtues.<sup>77</sup> Moreover, German humanists fought back against the Italian prejudices about them and created their own narrative.

The *Oratio in Ingelstadio* and the *Germania generalis* should be viewed against this patriotic background. In these works Conrad is concerned with establishing a prominent place for the Germans in humanist literature. He sought to elevate German culture and literature to the level of their southern counterparts. As he wrote in a letter to his friend Sixtus Tucher about his endeavours: "Although they may not be a match to the Italian talents, yet I hope to incite and awaken our Germans, who surpass me in learning and talent and much in the funds that support these two things, so that the Italians, most immoderate in their own glory, will be forced to acknowledge that not only the Roman Empire and arms, but also the splendour of letters has moved to the Germans."<sup>78</sup>

The rediscovery of Tacitus' *Germania* contributed to these German patriotic feelings.<sup>79</sup> The work became a powerful tool for German humanists: a classical text that described their ancestors not just as barbarians, but as noble and virtuous people. Conrad was not the first or the only one to make use of Tacitus' *Germania*, but in his hands the book became a centre-piece of German humanism and German nationalism.<sup>80</sup> Ironically, fighting against the abuse of the *Germania* by the Italians, some German humanists appropriated the work in a similar way,

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<sup>75</sup> Spitz 1957: 105. Rowland 1994: 308. Whaley 2011: 17. Hirschi 2011: 104-118. The growing sense of 'being German' in the 15<sup>th</sup> century – as opposed to being Italian for example – was mainly based on a shared language. Over time, the idea of a shared ethnic and cultural identity developed.

<sup>76</sup> Rowland 1994: 308.

<sup>77</sup> Forster 1948: 104. McClung Hallman 1980: 134-136. Krebs 2010: 97. Hirschi 2011: 175-179. For specific examples, see: Rowland 1994. In her article 'Revenge of the Regensburg Humanists, 1493' Rowland discusses a collection of epigrams by a group of German humanists, including Conrad Celtis. In these epigrams the German humanists turn against the Italians and accuse them of being pederasts. As Hirschi explains, German humanists feared the importation of the Italian vices to Germany. Over time, the *Germanus Italicatus* became a threat to the German virtues.

<sup>78</sup> Spitz 1957: 95. Celtis, *Epistolae* Nr. 15, p. 28-29 (ed. Rupprich): [...] *etsi Italicis ingeniis impar foret, Germanos tamen nostros, qui me doctrina et ingenio et multum haec duo fulcientibus opibus praestarent, impellerem expergefaceremque, quo Itali in suam gloriam effusissimi fateri cogerentur non solum Rhomanum imperium et arma, sed et litterarum splendorem ad Germanos commigrasse.*

<sup>79</sup> Spitz 1957: 67. Krebs 2010: 95-100.

<sup>80</sup> Krebs 2005: 194. Among others, Jacob Wimpfeling and Heinrich Bebel built their German histories on Tacitus' *Germania*.

idealising the image Tacitus had depicted – making the Germani appear as “unbeaten warriors, leading a simple and virtuous life, needing no written laws, thanks to their good morals, rejecting foreign habits, goods and blood, defending their collective property and singularity, loving freedom and practicing chastity.”<sup>81</sup>

Scholars have long debated Conrad’s use of Tacitus’ *Germania* in works like the *Germania generalis*, and in his *Ingolstadt Oratio*. Ridé (1977) and Krapf (1979) have argued that Celtis found in Tacitus’ *Germania* the German equivalent to Roman antiquity. According to them, the stark contrast between the barbaric past and cultivated present that Enea Silvio had created was unacceptable for him and other German humanists. They wanted to rehabilitate the Germanic past, and Tacitus’ *Germania* gave them the tools to do this.<sup>82</sup> In their view, Conrad idealizes the German past to offer a counterweight to the Italian stereotype of the barbaric North. On the contrary, Müller (2001) strongly disagrees. He argues that this interpretation presupposes a humanist concern for recovering a German antiquity – which did not exist, according to him.<sup>83</sup> Instead, Müller suggests that Conrad actually completely adopts the narrative of transformation from Enea Silvio: a transformation from *Germania antiqua* to *Germania nova*, from barbarism to refinement.<sup>84</sup> In what follows, I examine the way Conrad engages with Tacitus’ *Germania* in the *Ingolstadt Oratio* and the *Germania generalis*, and how he constructs an image of the (ancient) German, especially in contrast to the Italian.

### 3. Oratio in Gymnasio in Ingelstadio Publice Recitata (1492)

In his inaugural speech of 1492 Conrad addressed an audience of students and staff of the Ingolstadt University. Before getting into the main body of his oration, Conrad humbly apologizes for his faulty Latin, immediately followed by an evocation of the intellectual glory of early German genius. He longs for the olden days of German genius (*prisca illa Germaniae nostrae ingenia*) – recalling a time when, as he claims, Germans were said to have favoured Greek over Latin.<sup>85</sup> By evoking a past of intellectual greatness, right from the start, Conrad reframes the German history not as one of cultural barbarism, but as having humanist potential.

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<sup>81</sup> Hirschi 2011: 169.

<sup>82</sup> Müller opposes a tradition of assuming an idealised reading of Tacitus by Celtis. Krapf (1979: 68-91) bases his argument of Celtis’ ideal past mainly on Amores 2.9. According to Müller (2001: 424-428) Krapf’s theory is problematic, since most of the arguments he uses to prove that Celtis is trying to create an ideal Germanic past can also be explained as genre-specific requirements. Ridé’s arguments are based on the assumption that German humanists were looking for a great past – comparable to the Roman past: “Il fallait, en plus, être en mesure et d’exciper d’un passé comparable a celui des Italiens. Comparable, c’est-à-dire, a la fois aussi Glorieux et aussi ancien (1977: 127).” The stark contrast Enea makes between past and present is unacceptable for them (1977: 179).

<sup>83</sup> Müller 2001: 428-439. “Dem deutschen Humanisten geht es folglich nicht um eine Idealisierung der germanischen Vergangenheit, sondern er versucht sie zu neutralisieren. Im gegebenen historischen Verlauf ist sie nicht relevant (2001: 434).” Müller argues that the Germans did not take over the Italian view of history, divided into three parts: antiquity, middle ages, modernity. Instead, Celtis views the upward trend of his own country as opposed to the downward trend of Italy. Therefore, an idealization of German antiquity was not relevant to Celtis and other German humanists. This interpretation seems a little short-sighted. The fact that German humanists followed a different historical trajectory than the Italians does not necessarily mean that they lacked interest in a glorious antiquity.

<sup>84</sup> Müller 2001: 407-408.

<sup>85</sup> Celtis Ing. Or. 1.

Yet, the glory of those days has faded, and even in Italy the brilliance of literature is in decline.<sup>86</sup> It is against this backdrop of cultural decay that Conrad turns to the central theme of his speech: the intellectual regeneration of Germany through the study of philosophy and ancient literature:

Nihil autem plane dignius et iucundius ad vos dicere constitui, quod vel me magis deceat et vos audire conveniat, quam ut vestros animos ad virtutem et optimarum artium studia cohortarer. Quibus rebus quam facile vera gloria, immortalis fama et felicitas in hac vita nostra angustissima comparari potest!<sup>87</sup>

I have decided that there is clearly nothing more worthily and more pleasantly suitable to myself to tell you and suitable to you to listen to, than that I encourage your minds to virtue and study of the supreme arts. Through these things, how easily can true glory, immortal fame, and happiness in this very short life of ours be procured!

The speech is more than a call to students to study philosophy and literature; it becomes a performance in which Conrad redefines the role of the German humanists, grounded in patriotic pride. In this section, I will examine how Conrad uses this speech to establish: 1) Germany not as a marginal player in the humanist world, but as the rightful heir to the ancient Roman cultural heritage, and 2) what it means to be German, especially in contrast to the being Italian. Even though Conrad had at this time not yet read Enea Silvio's *Germania*, he directly inverts his narrative regarding the influence of the Italians on the Germans. Many of the ideas he introduces in his inaugural address will later be developed further in his *Germania generalis*, making the *Ingolstadt Oratio* an important starting point for Conrad's broader patriotic project.

#### a. From *translatio imperii* to *translatio studii*

In the *Oratio*, Conrad refers to the Germans as the heirs of the Roman Empire no less than six times.<sup>88</sup> This implies the transition of the power of the ancient Roman Empire to the Holy Roman Empire – often referred to as the *translatio imperii*. For Conrad, this transition of power to the Germans is accompanied by a responsibility that the Germans are not yet living up to. Following in the footsteps of ancient Rome, Germany should be established as the new centre of learning: *translatio studii*.<sup>89</sup> Yet, Conrad's fellow-Germans are occupied with other endeavours. It is time for Germany to prove itself worthy of this inheritance:

Aemulamini, nobiles viri, priscam nobilitatem Romanam, quae accepto Graecorum imperio ita omnem sapientiam et eloquentiam eorum iunxerunt, ut dubium sit, an aequasse aut superasse omnem Graecam inventionem et doctrinae suppellectilem videantur. Ita et vos accepto Italorum imperio exuta foeda barbarie Romanorum artium affectatores esse debebitis.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Celtis Ing. Or. 2.

<sup>87</sup> Celtis Ing. Or. 5-7.

<sup>88</sup> Celtis Ing. Or. 25, 29, 43, 48, 78, 83.

<sup>89</sup> See: S. de Beer 2020.

<sup>90</sup> Celtis Ing. Or. 29.

Emulate, noble men, the ancient Roman nobility, who, after taking over the empire of the Greeks, united all their wisdom and eloquence in such a way, that it can be doubted whether they should be regarded to have equalled or surpassed all Greek invention and learning equipment. This is how you, who have taken over the empire of the Italians, should cast off that detestable barbarism and strive for the Roman arts.

In the same way that the Romans adopted and continued the intellectual heritage of the Greeks, the Germans now have to do the same. Conrad openly criticizes his own people for failing to live up to this duty. He strongly disapproves of their indifference to learning and the arts, and exhorts them to cast off their repulsive barbarism and instead dedicate their time to the Roman arts.<sup>91</sup> It is of importance here that Conrad only focusses on the Roman erudition (*sapientia, eloquentia, inventio, doctrinae supellex*) that needs to be emulated; the Germans are provided concerning morality, as will become clear in the next part. This strive for learning is portrayed by Conrad as a patriotic mission aimed at breaking free from the cultural hegemony of Italy – the Germans must surpass the Italians in the one field they still dominate: literature.<sup>92</sup>

There is a struggle inherent in this narrative: Italy, the very model of literary excellence, is at the same time Germany's greatest rival.<sup>93</sup> Conrad cannot, and does not, deny Italian supremacy in Latin literature. In the same manner, he does not deny his fellow Germans' cultural barbarism.<sup>94</sup> Here, Conrad confronts a paradox that lies at the heart of German humanism: how can we explain that Conrad is working hard to liberate the Germans from the barbarian stereotype imposed on them by Italian humanists, but at the same time refers to the Germans as barbarians himself? Humanists had a duty to eradicate 'barbarism' and promote learning. German humanists were not satisfied with the level of classical education in their nation, but wanted to be taken seriously as players in the humanist field. As a result, Germany was often portrayed as civilised to a foreign audience, but in need of civilisation to a German audience.<sup>95</sup> Conrad resolves the paradox by directing his criticism inward, but redirecting the blame outward: to the Italians.

### **b. German *virtus* and *robur***

Conrad's construction of German identity depends on contrast, and his portrayal of the Italians is key to that contrast. A fascinating aspect of Tacitus' *Germania* is the distinction he makes between the Germani and the Romans, without creating a clear-cut hierarchy between the two. Crucial for German humanists is the way Tacitus describes the 'ancient spirit' of the Germani, pure and simple, as opposed to the Roman spirit, corrupted by luxury.<sup>96</sup> Celtis takes this contrast

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<sup>91</sup> Celtis Ing. Or. 29.

<sup>92</sup> Celtis Ing. Or. 71. *Translatio imperii vs. translatio studii*.

<sup>93</sup> Rowland 1994: 318: "There is at the heart of Celtis' address in Ingolstadt [...] a set of conflicting impulses: on the one hand, a fascination with the ancient world of the Greeks, Romans, and Hebrews; on the other, a resentment of those living peoples, the Jews, Italians, and Byzantine Greeks, who were physically and culturally the direct descendants of the venerated ancients."

<sup>94</sup> Celtis refers to the Germans as barbarians multiple times in his *Oratio*. He even comments on the habit of robbery, which to his disgust and surprise still exists in his time, even after transforming the marshes and forests into modern cities (Celtis Ing. Or. 32-33).

<sup>95</sup> Hirschi 2011: 164.

<sup>96</sup> Hirschi 2011: 169.

and applies it to his own time. He uses the *Germania* to establish that the Germans are, just like their ancestors, inherently virtuous and strong:

Sed ad vos ego iam, nobiles viri et adolescents generosi, orationem converto, ad quos avita virtute et Germano illo invicto robore Italiae imperium commigravit quique hoc gymnasium super alia Germaniae nostrae studia frequentatis, fecundatis magnoque ornamento et decori estis.<sup>97</sup>

But now I turn my speech to you, noble men and well-born youth, to whom the Italian empire has passed through ancestral virtue and that invincible German strength, you who fill this gymnasium in preference to the other schools of our Germany, who enrich it and adorn it with great distinction.

Conrad explicitly states that the Roman Empire has migrated to Germany through two internal qualities of the German people: their *virtus* and *robur*.<sup>98</sup> He implies a natural and legitimate succession. By adding the adjectives *avitus* and *invictus* Celtis adds a layer of continuity: virtue and strength are inherent to the Germans, as evidenced in Tacitus' *Germania*. However, these qualities have become obscured in many Germans of Conrad's time. He encourages his audience to revive this ancient spirit, reclaiming the *furor teutonicus* detested by many Italians of his time as a positive quality:<sup>99</sup>

Induite veteres illos animos, viri Germani, quibus totiens Romanis terrori et formidini fuistis [...].<sup>100</sup>

Put on that old spirit, German men, with which you so often terrified and frightened the Romans.

The decline of this spirit is not due to internal failure alone, but to external contamination. The real threat to German greatness comes from Italian luxury and greed. In a few lines, Conrad rages against the neglect of literature by German princes and bishops, taken up by an intense greed for money under the influence of Italians.<sup>101</sup> Far from civilizing the Germans, Italian influence has infected them with vice and undermined their ancestral strength:

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<sup>97</sup> Celtis Ing. Or. 25.

<sup>98</sup> This implies that these are exactly the qualities the Italians do not possess.

<sup>99</sup> Forster 1948: 105. A century earlier Petrarch had written in a poem about Italy that the Alps formed a welcome barrier against the 'German fury.' Petrarch, *Rime Sparse* no. 128 (Ed. Durling): *Ben provide Natura al nostro stato / Quando de li Alpi schermo / Pose fra noi e la tedesca rabbia*. Celtis rewrites these lines, emphasising the ever-lasting rivalry between the Germans and the Italians (Ing. Or. 37-38): *Tantum potuit vetus et inexpiabile inter nos odium et antiqua discordia numinum, quam nisi provida natura Alpibus et elatis in sidera scopulis diremisset, a mutuis caedibus pro hostile utrinque spiritu nunquam temperaretur* (So great is that old and intricate hatred between us and the ancient disagreement between our deities, that, except for the fact that caring nature had separated us by the Alps and rocks as high as the stars, it could never be refrained from mutual bloodshed due to the hostile spirit on both sides). Celtis makes the Alpine barrier into a necessary division not to protect Italian civilization from German barbarism, but to prevent a mutual destruction between two powerful peoples.

<sup>100</sup> Celtis Ing. Or. 41-42.

<sup>101</sup> Celtis Ing. Or. 61-65.

Ita nos Italicus luxus corruptit et saeva in extorquendo argento pernicioso crudelitas, ut plane sanctius et sacrius fuisset nos agere rudi illa et silvestri vita, dum inter continentiae fines vivebamus, quam tot gulae et luxus instrumenta, quibus nihil unquam satis est, invexisse peregrinosque mores induisse.<sup>102</sup>

To such an extent has Italian luxury and savage cruelty in obtaining destructive silver corrupted us, that it simply would have been more holy and pleasant for us to lead that rough and wild life, while living within the bounds of restraint, than to have brought in the instruments of so much gluttony and luxury, which are never satisfied, and to have engaged in foreign customs.

Conrad makes a radical statement: it would have actually been better for the Germans to still live the life of the ancient Germani, as described by Tacitus, than a life corrupted by the imported Italian customs. Conrad here employs the stereotype of the immoral, luxury-obsessed Italians. Othering becomes a tool of reversal for Conrad: where Enea Silvio had portrayed the Italians as the ones responsible for eradicating the barbarism of the Germans and for bringing civilization, Conrad argues that it is precisely this Italian civilization that now threatens to destroy German virtue. Rather than strive to imitate Italy, Conrad calls on his fellow Germans to recognize and revive their own native spirit, rooted in strength, and virtue.

#### 4. The *Germania generalis*

Conrad's *Germania generalis* – which was first published complementary to his edition of Tacitus' *Germania* in 1500, and for a second time with his *Amores* in 1502 – is a poem about the German land and its people.<sup>103</sup> The *Germania generalis* was published twenty years after Conrad's *Ingolstadt Oratio*. By now, Enea Silvio's *Germania* has added a new incentive for Conrad to rewrite the ancient German history: how does he 'fix' Enea Silvio's abuse of Tacitus' *Germania*?

##### a. Reclaiming Germania

This ideological discourse is immediately evident in the very first two words of the ethnographic section: *gens invicta*.<sup>104</sup> In direct opposition to Enea Silvio, who had claimed that Germania had been entirely conquered by the Romans, Conrad begins by establishing German independence and military resilience.<sup>105</sup> By denying Rome's conquest of Germania, Conrad is consequently rejecting the hierarchical Roman-Germanic power dynamic that underpins Enea Silvio's argument. Instead, Conrad aligns himself closer to Tacitus, who – as discussed in chapter 1 – portrays the Roman-Germanic conflict as an ongoing struggle with wins and losses on both sides. Conrad reinforces this by attributing to the Germans an unmatched resilience:

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<sup>102</sup> Celtis Ing. Or. 66.

<sup>103</sup> As mentioned a central theme in Celtis' oeuvre. The *Germania generalis* also takes up a special position as the precursor to Celtis' big project: the *Germania Illustrata*.

<sup>104</sup> Celtis Ger. Gen. 56.

<sup>105</sup> Aen. Silv. Germ. 2.5: *tota Germanica natio in potestatem Romanorum facta est*.

Solis et algoris patiens durique laboris,  
Ingrata ignavam vite tolerare quietem.<sup>106</sup>

Able to withstand sun, cold and hard labour,  
Unwilling to bear the sluggish rest of life.

The Germanic resilience against the cold is a well-known trope in ancient authors; their ability to withstand the sun is an addition by Conrad.<sup>107</sup> The second line, however, diverges from Tacitus.<sup>108</sup> In the *Germania* Tacitus observes that when there is no war, the Germani engage in hunting, but spend even more time *per otium*. The men lounge about idly (*ipsi hebent*) while their wives and elderly manage domestic affairs. Tacitus finds it strange that these men at the same time love laziness (*ament inertiam*), but hate quietness (*oderint quietem*).<sup>109</sup> Conrad purposely omits the first part of Tacitus' description and only adopts Tacitus' *quies*. He redefines it not as peace or rest, but as lazy inaction. Where Tacitus had observed contradictions in the attitude of the Germans toward leisure, Celtis eliminates the ambiguity. Like Enea Silvio, we see that Conrad selectively appropriates Tacitus' *Germania* to suit his own rhetorical agenda.

One of Conrad's most striking strategies in the *Germania generalis* is the reinterpretation of qualities framed as barbaric by Enea Silvio. Enea had continued his negative attitude towards the Germani in describing the Germans of his time, claiming that two barbaric traits remained among them: their rough language and love for robbery. Conrad reclaims these traits as virtues by tying them to the Germans' celebrated strength.<sup>110</sup> After describing the physical characteristics of the Germani – their large bodies, milk-white skin, blond hair, and light eyes – Conrad describes their *vox*, referring not only to their voice, but also their language:<sup>111</sup>

Vox habitum mentis cum gestu et pectora prodit:  
Vox, que nil muliebre sonat, sed tota virilis  
Martia crassiloque testatur corda palato.<sup>112</sup>

The voice reveals the state of mind, together with the attitude, and the heart:  
The voice, which does not sound feminine, but completely masculine,  
Shows with its coarse palate the war-like heart.

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<sup>106</sup> Celtis Ger. Gen. 58-59.

<sup>107</sup> Müller 2001: 124.

<sup>108</sup> Müller 2001: 124. Krebs 2005: 196.

<sup>109</sup> Tac. Ger. 15.1-2: *Quotiens bella non ineunt, non multum venatibus, plus per otium transigunt, dediti somno ciboque: fortissimus quisque ac bellicosissimus nihil agens, delegata domus et penatium et agrorum cura feminis senibusque et infirmissimo cuique ex familia, ipsi hebent, mira diversitate naturae, cum idem homines sic ament inertiam et oderint quietem* (Whenever they are not starting wars, they spend a little time hunting, but more time in idleness, surrendered to sleep and food: while the strongest and bravest men do nothing, and the care for the home, the hearth and the fields has been delegated to the women, the elderly, and the weakest family-members, they themselves lounge about, by that astonishing contradiction of nature, that the same men love laziness so much as they hate peace).

<sup>110</sup> Krebs 2005: 208-209. Müller 2001: 408-409.

<sup>111</sup> Celtis Ger. Gen. 66-70.

<sup>112</sup> Celtis Ger. Gen. 71-73.

For Conrad, the German *vox* reflects the German soul. The German language is coarse not because it is uncultured, but because it is masculine (*virilis*). This masculine voice reveals a martial heart (*Martia corda*). This interpretation echoes Tacitus' comment in book 3 of the *Germania* on the power of Germanic war songs.<sup>113</sup> Conrad extends this connection, presenting the German language as an expression of German strength and bravery rather than a mark of barbarism. This emphasis on the masculinity of the Germans implicitly forms a contrast with the supposed effeminacy of the Italians – one of the main elements of the German stereotype of the Italian in the 15<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>114</sup> Conrad applies the same strategy to the remaining robbery among the Germans:

Nec censere nephas animum intendisse rapinis,  
 Dum fera belligeri meditantur prelia Martis  
 Atque illum regum celsas quesisse per aulas;<sup>115</sup>

Nor do they deem it a crime to set their minds on plunder,  
 While they think about the wild battles of warmongering Mars,  
 And they seek this in the lofty courts of kings.

Conrad does not deny Germanic aggression or the practice of plunder. Instead, he legitimizes it within the context of warfare, framing it simply as an extension of the martial prowess under the guidance of Mars. This rhetorical move mirrors his earlier strategy: what Enea condemns as barbaric, Conrad reframes as heroic. Robbery, like language, is elevated by connecting it to the German strength.<sup>116</sup> Interestingly, in his *Oratio in Ingelstadio* Conrad himself condemned the habit of robbery among the Germans of his day. He even referred to it as barbarism. Here, we see that he instead tries to justify it. This could be explained by the beforementioned paradox of German humanism: speaking to a German audience, Conrad was comfortable expressing his dissatisfaction with the German people, but now the German people need to be defended on the international stage.

Similarly, where Conrad in the *Oratio* had lamented the lack of study, he now praises the German youth for their devotion to studying. In describing the common pursuits of the Germans (*commune his studium*), Conrad emphasizes that the youth devote themselves to studying, or otherwise travelling the world and bringing back goods for their country.<sup>117</sup> According to Conrad, the Germans engage in hunting, horse-riding, wandering, and earning a livelihood through viticulture and agriculture – activities some ancient authors explicitly denied were

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<sup>113</sup> Tac. Ger. 3.1. Tacitus describes the war-songs of the Germanics, used to inspire courage in the soldiers and intimidate the enemies. He also likens the voice to the heart: *nec tam vocis ille quam virtutis concentus videtur* (and it seems not so much a symphony of voices as of courage).

<sup>114</sup> Hirschi 2011: 176-178.

<sup>115</sup> Celtis Ger. Gen. 81-84.

<sup>116</sup> Müller 2001: 129-130. "Celtis hingegen ist bemüht, diese Unart als rechtmäßige Handlung im Krieg erscheinen zu lassen, und versucht damit, auch die zweite negative Eigenschaft, die Enea Silvios positives Bild von den Deutschen trübt, als Bestandteil einer ansonsten geschätzten Eigenschaft erscheinen zu lassen."

<sup>117</sup> Celtis Ger. Gen. 78-81. Celtis is here clearly referring to the youth in his time.

present in ancient Germania.<sup>118</sup> Conrad actively challenges the ancient sources who portrayed the German life as primitive and uncultured.<sup>119</sup>

### b. Change and continuity

Toward the end of his ethnographic chapter, Conrad summarises the qualities of the Germans, culminating in a vision of moral rectitude that goes beyond what Tacitus ever described. The *animus Germanicus* does not fear death or the shedding of blood in defence of the fatherland or friends. On the contrary, the Germans are eager to act when injustice is done to them:

Atque avidus cedis, si qua ulla iniuria lesit,  
Quique fidem sancto et constanti pectore seruat  
Religionis amans superumque et cultor honesti  
Et veri iustique tenax mens consona labris  
Ficta colorate fugiens mendacia lingue.<sup>120</sup>

And eagerly longing for bloodshed, if any injustice has harmed them,  
And the mind cherishes loyalty in the venerable and steady chest,  
Loves religion and the celestials, and cultivates honesty and truth,  
Is persistent in justice, and harmonious with the lips,  
Flees fabricated lies from a coloured tongue.

These lines encapsulate Conrad's image of the ideal German: brave, loyal, pious, and truthful. These pious, religion-loving Germans present a stark contrast to the impious, human-offering Germani of Enea Silvio. This portrayal clearly builds on a crucial aspect of Tacitus' *Germania*, namely Tacitus' statement that the Germani did not have need for laws because of their innate morality.<sup>121</sup> Enea Silvio had reversed the argument, making the absence of laws evidence of barbarism. Conrad here restores Tacitus' original intent, presenting the Germans as instinctively righteous – yet he expands the image significantly.

But, just as in the *Oratio*, Conrad is not afraid to apply the label of 'barbarism' to his own people. Shifting from an ethnographical to a geographical description, Conrad paints a picture of a fertile and flourishing German land. The fruitful soil feeds people and livestock, produces rich harvests and flowery meadows. The fresh lakes are full of fish and the sunny hills full of vineyards. All this has resulted in diverse agriculture and cities with well-maintained walls.<sup>122</sup> These cities are inhabited by a *mitior populus*:

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<sup>118</sup> Celtis *Ger. Gen.* 74-77. Müller (2001: 128-129) comments that Caesar (*BGall.* 6.22) and Strabo (*Geogr.* 7.1.3) both write that the Germani were not interested in cultivating their lands. Caesar adds that even the import of wine was not tolerated (*Caes. BGall.* 4.2). As seen in chapter 1, these thoughts are echoed in Enea Silvio's description of *Germania antiqua*.

<sup>119</sup> Müller 2001: 128.

<sup>120</sup> Celtis *Ger. Gen.* 94-98.

<sup>121</sup> Krebs 2005: 197-198. *Tac. Ger.* 19.2: *plusque ibi boni mores valent quam alibi bonae leges*.

<sup>122</sup> Celtis *Ger. Gen.* 266-275. Especially the comment about the walled-cities reminds of Enea Silvio. Tacitus had described the living situation of the Germanics as unurbanized (*Ger.* 16.1): *Nullas Germanorum populis urbes habitari satis notum est, ne pati quidem inter se iunctas sedes* (It is well known that no cities are inhabited by the

Mitior et populus germane nascitur orbe  
Explosa ruditate fera, quam barbarus olim  
Siluicola in riguis seruabat saltibus ortus.<sup>123</sup>

And a milder people is rising on German territory,  
After the wild roughness has been driven out, which was once  
Reserved by the barbarian, inhabiting the woods, born in the watery valleys.

Here, Conrad openly acknowledges a transformation in the German people. A gentler, more civilised people has emerged, and the wild roughness once preserved by forest-dwelling barbarians has been expelled. The Germans have evolved. Crucially, this change is in no way attributed to Roman conquest or Italian influence.<sup>124</sup>

Throughout the poem, Conrad often purposely obscures the difference between ancient and present times.<sup>125</sup> It is at most times not differentiated whether he is referring to ancient Germania or contemporary Germany. In the very beginning he writes: *gens invicta manet*, followed by the list of qualities – their resilience to heath and cold, etc. Similarly to the continuity of the *virtus* and *robur* in the *Ingolstadt Oratio*, this creates an effect of timelessness and continuity of the German mores; the description of the ideal German above could refer to both the ancient Germani and the Germans of Conrad's time.<sup>126</sup> In the description of the German *commune studium* activities as hunting, horse-riding, and wandering seem timeless, while vinery, agriculture, education, seafaring and commerce relate to new times.<sup>127</sup> This helps present an image of *Germania nova* to the reader of change and continuity: a contemporary Germany that shares *virtus* and *robur* with *Germania antiqua*, but surpasses it in culture and learnedness.

## 5. Conclusion

In the *Ingolstadt Oratio* and the *Germania generalis*, Conrad works on an image of ancient and contemporary Germany. He bases the German identity in the qualities of *virtus* (virtue) and *robur* (strength), which have been inherent in the Germans from antiquity to Conrad's time. It

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German tribes, and that homes are not allowed to be close together). Enea Silvio emphasized this absence of cities as a clear sign of barbarism. Celtis here clearly refers to a change of the situation.

<sup>123</sup> Celtis *Ger. Gen.* 276-278.

<sup>124</sup> Spitz 1948: 101. Brann 1979: 18. Ben-Tov 2009: 190. We know from other works that Celtis did not credit the Christian church for the bringing of culture and monotheism to the German barbarians. Celtis had developed his own story – his Greek-druid-theory – in which he claims that druids who lived according to ancient Greek culture and philosophy lived among the Germani. They were responsible for bringing agriculture, settled life, and even monotheism to ancient Germania. These druids were later succeeded by monks. Through this theory Celtis is able to completely set aside the supposed Roman/Italian influence on ancient Germania, as proposed by Enea Silvio.

<sup>125</sup> Krebs 2005: 205-210. Krebs argues that Celtis argues for change and continuity at the same time: the change is concerned with learning, literature and culture, while the continuity is concerned with the morals. The uncertainty of which time period Celtis is referring to at times helps construct this image, especially of continuity of the good qualities. Where change is concerned, it becomes clear that a transition from one time to the other is implied.

<sup>126</sup> Krebs 2005: 202-203.

<sup>127</sup> All these activities are absent in Tacitus' *Germania*.

is through these that the Roman Empire has passed on to them, and it is through these that they will have to devote themselves to philosophy and literature, in order to really reach their full potential as the heirs of the Roman Empire. Interestingly, Conrad blames Italian influence for the corruption and barbarisation of the Germans. He ‘others’ the Italians by portraying them as the exact opposite of the Germans. Twenty years later, after reading Enea Silvio’s version of the *Germania*, Conrad continues this narrative based on the innate morality and strength of the Germans, but again leaves space for cultural barbarism. He targets Enea’s misconceptions and justifies the German language and robbery in Germany by connecting them to German virtue and strength, but does not completely eradicate the notion of barbarism from ancient Germania. He present an image of change and continuity, in which the German morals stay the same and the level of education and literature changes.

In these two works, Conrad Celtis constructs a counter-narrative to the Italian cultural hegemony and the Italian stereotype of the barbaric German – using the same source that underpinned such narratives: Tacitus’ *Germania*. Similar to Enea Silvio, Conrad deliberately chooses which elements of Tacitus’ *Germania* he uses. At the same time he launched a counterattack on the Italians, portraying them as corrupted by their obsession with luxury and decadence, contrasting them to the moral purity of the Germans. He does not present a complete idealisation of ancient Germania, nor does he follow Enea Silvio’s transformation of the barbarian Germani to the Christian Germans. Through his selective use of Tacitus and his strategic othering of Italy, Conrad constructs a powerful vision of German identity: not defined by imitation, but by the revival and refinement of what was always inherently present.

## CONCLUSION

The confrontation between Enea Silvio Piccolomini and Conrad Celtis over the meaning of Tacitus' *Germania* offers a revealing case study in Renaissance humanist engagement with the classical past. This thesis has shown that such engagement with antiquity was not neutral, but always, to some degree, a rhetorical and ideological act. Both Enea Silvio and Conrad reshaped antiquity to serve their own ideological purposes, resulting in two opposing narratives grounded in the same text: Tacitus' *Germania*. Tacitus' authority as a Roman historian allowed them to articulate their own views on the present. Historical accuracy or fidelity to Tacitus' original intention was not the primary concern for both parties. Instead, both authors drew on Tacitus' authority in a highly selective reading of the *Germania*, emphasizing and omitting content according to their ideological agendas. Tacitus thus functions not as a neutral historical source, but as a malleable authority within a rhetorical contest over identity.

Enea Silvio employed Tacitus' *Germania* as part of a broader defence of the Roman Church against criticism from the German clergy. Being a papal candidate, Enea strove to demonstrate his worthiness and his loyalty to the Church, trying to prove his own fitness for the papacy. He used the *Germania* to create a damning image of the ancient Germani as savage, uncivilized barbarians – lacking cities, laws, writing, religion, and all other aspects of civilization, culture and education. In contrast, Rome appears as the civilizing force that rescued the Germans from this barbarism. Enea's goal was not necessarily to make the Germans look bad, but to make the Italians look good in comparison to them. This strategy of othering – in which he defines the self through contrast with the other – served to reinforce the authority of the Church. Creating this power imbalance between the two peoples was essential to justify the continued dominance of the Church and of Italy in intellectual and moral terms. Even in his ostensibly positive depiction of *Germania nova*, the cultivated and Christianized version of Germany, Enea Silvio maintains this power imbalance. He insists that two barbaric traits still linger among the Germans, again highlighting their inferiority and indebtedness to Rome.

Roughly fifty years later, Conrad Celtis offered a complete reversal of this narrative. Conrad – regarded as the arch-humanist of Germany – was working hard to put Germany on the humanist map. In a humanist climate dominated by Italian pride, Conrad sought to elevate the status of German humanism and assert Germany's rightful place within this tradition. Drawing on the idea of the *translatio imperii*, Celtis argued for a corresponding *translatio studii*, whereby literary and intellectual excellence also moved northward. In both his *Ingolstadt Oratio* and *Germania generalis* Conrad uses Tacitus' *Germania*, reclaiming it not as a source of shame, but of pride. He constructs a counter-narrative in which the German people are portrayed as inherently strong, virtuous and noble – embodying the German qualities of *virtus* and *robur* that Tacitus had contrasted with Roman decadence and greed. In Conrad's story, the German people had always possessed these noble qualities; what had changed was not their morality, but their cultural refinement. By casting off their barbarism and dedicating themselves to learning, Conrad envisioned the Germans as fulfilling their historical destiny as heirs of the ancient Roman Empire. In front of a German audience he expresses his concerns about the progress of this process, but considers it a done deal in front of an international audience. Like Enea Silvio, Conrad employed othering as a strategy: he casts the Italians as the decadent

'other', severely corrupted by luxury and greed. The Italians are in no way responsible for 'saving' the Germans from barbarism, instead it is the importation of Italian decadence that poses the real threat to the Germans. In doing so, he rewrites the power dynamic proposed by Enea Silvio between North and South, presenting Germany not as the pupil of Rome, but as its replacement.

Both authors thus use Tacitus and the process of othering to construct sharply different visions of identity. Enea Silvio's *Germania* is a story of wild barbarism, salvation, and gratitude towards Rome. Conrad's *Germania* is a story of continuity and change, of strength and virtue, of barbarism and refinement. What unites their approaches is their use of Tacitus as a rhetorical weapon. The selective appropriation of the *Germania* did not end in the Renaissance. In later centuries, Tacitus' work would be reinterpreted over and over again. Each new interpretation reflects more about the context of its creators and readers than about the world of Tacitus himself. Texts do not possess fixed meanings: their function changes according to the wants and needs of the moment. Whether in defence of the Apostolic See or in pursuit of national dignity, Tacitus' classical past was not simply recovered – it was reimagined.

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