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Images of the Germani and Xiongnu in the Works of Tacitus and Sima Qian

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Barbaricum Depictum:

Images of the Germani and Xiongnu in the Works of Tacitus and Sima Qian

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A fundamental catalyst for change in human history has been contact, peaceful or military, between peoples hitherto unknown to one another. Empires have fallen, kingdoms been established, religions proselytized, and learning shared due to these contacts. The participants in these exchanges must have seen one another in a markedly different light, although this may only be guessed at, for we only have written records of the city-dwelling agriculturalists, that is, the cultivators of letters, art, and other tokens of civilization. From their perspective at least, the new peoples from the wilderness were almost invariably referred to as barbarians, people living outside the familiar sphere of civilization in a state little removed from that of animals. W. R. Jones offers the following definition of barbarism as a familiar notion in the ancient world:

The concept of ‘barbarism,’ like its antonym, ‘civilization,’ was the invention of civilized man, who thereby expressed self-approval by contrasting his condition with that of others whom he assumed to exist at lower levels of material, intellectual, and moral development. The awareness of being civilized, that new sense of identity which civilization gave its participants, was as much the product of cultural growth and refinement as the more tangible and visible achievements of civilized experience. The antithesis which opposed civilization to barbarism was a highly useful cliché, and one which served equally well as a means of self-congratulation and as a rationalization for aggression (377).

Yet alongside this “self-congratulation” and “rationalization for aggression,” it is interesting to note that in the works of those who actually took the time to learn about their

barbarian neighbors, there may be found in the place of abhorrence and derision an admiration for, and at times even an envy of, the lifestyle and culture of the barbarians. Some even held up the virtues they discovered amongst neighboring peoples as an instructive contrast to their own civilized ways. For example, Salvian, a Roman Christian writing in the fifth century A.D., used the (perhaps exaggerated) virtue and chastity of Vandals and Goths as a mirror to what he believed was a hopelessly corrupt and unethical Christian society (Jones 385). And even beyond any political or social agenda, there has always been a fascination with the savage man which is as old as the oldest story on earth, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, wherein the man-beast Enkidu embodies the suspicion that civilization comes at a price: that we lose a part of our essential self when we give up our intimate ties to the natural world. Therefore it is not surprising that ancient historians and readers alike were enthralled by tales of barbarian peoples inhabiting untamed wastelands, tales made more vivid by the all-too-real catastrophic defeats they could inflict upon their civilized neighbors.

In ancient Rome and China, two historians have left us particularly detailed descriptions of the peoples facing their respective empires across what were at times fiercely contested frontiers. The Roman Tacitus (b. A.D. 56) studied the Germanic tribes living east of the Rhine; the Chinese Sima Qian 司馬遷 (c. 145–85 B.C.) was concerned with the Xiōngnú 匈奴, a nomadic steppe people often equated, though disputedly, with the Huns who were to invade the Roman Empire some five centuries later. Though the cultures of the Germani and Xiongnu must have been very different from one another, inhabiting climates as dissimilar as the Black Forest of Germany and the Gobi Desert of today's Inner Mongolia, there are nevertheless many similarities in the depictions Tacitus and Sima Qian give us of these two peoples. Each is quick to point out what he considered to be the ruder aspects of barbarian society and does so by employing imagery and language which would have been frightening (though no doubt exciting and exotic as well) to the civilized wearers of togas and ritual headdresses: a hostile and untamed climate, absence of permanent architectural structures, ignorance of letters, and an obsession with warfare. Yet both Tacitus and Sima Qian were also aware of the redemptive qualities of life in *barbaricum*. In their eyes, the Germani and Xiongnu both led lives free of material clutter; they enjoyed a degree of personal autonomy unheard of to Romans and Chinese; even in the

realm of interpersonal relations, Tacitus and Sima Qian both suggest that their barbarian neighbors may be more faithful to principles of loyalty and piety than their own Roman and Chinese compatriots.

In this paper I will discuss the two works the *Germania* and the *Shiji* 史記 and the similarities between their ethnographic content. The *Shiji* itself is a historical work much larger in scope than the *Germania*, which is simply an ethnography; the majority of the examples cited from the *Shiji* are therefore taken from the "Xiongnu Liezhuan" 匈奴列传, the chapter most concerned with the Xiongnu, although some selections are from other chapters in the *Shiji*. The purpose of this paper is neither to give a synopsis of the two works nor to argue a fundamental likeness between the ancient Germani and the Xiongnu. Rather it is to examine the elements of barbarian society which Tacitus and Sima Qian both thought worth commenting on as well as their subjective reactions to alien customs. In many of the examples discussed below, one recognizes the familiar image of the noble savage, an ultimately pejorative description of peoples living in relatively primitive societies. It is interesting to note, however, the ways in which the attitude of the writers (who considered their own cultures to be superior to those of the peoples they were describing) alternates between emphasis on the nobility and the savagery of their respective subjects. At times, each of them manipulates this image in order to point out his own society's moral corruption and excess, the decay of the virtues of a long-past golden age (Benario 46). At other times, they focus on the simplicity and rudeness of barbarian character and culture, reflecting their prejudices as literati of two of the great empires of the Ancient World. And at other times still, and most interestingly, there are observations that neither degrade their object nor support political or social criticism: observations of wonder, bemusement, and even envy of a world and lifestyle so utterly removed from one's own. As we will see, both Tacitus and Sima Qian give a varied and nuanced view of barbarian society and, though many of the details vary, one is struck by the number of parallel images and stylistic motifs that may be found in both of their works.



Modern representation of Germanic warriors¹

¹ Available at: <http://utenti.multimania.it/campagneparallele/> Accessed 30 October 2010.

A description of a barbarian people necessitates description of the barbarian homeland, which one may expect to be very different from the lands of the civilized ethnographers. In each case it is situated in a remote and inhospitable climate where no civilized person would choose to settle. Tacitus wonders what sort of person might forego the lands of the empire and actually *choose* to live in Germania:

quis porro, praeter periculum horridi et ignoti maris, Asia aut Africa aut Italia relictā Germaniam peteret, informem terris, asperam caelo, tristem cultu aspectuque, nisi si patria sit? ... Terra etsi aliquanto specie differt, in universum tamen aut silvis horrida aut paludibus foeda ... (*Germ.* 2,5. 37–39).

Who moreover, beyond the danger of a terrible and unknown sea, would leave behind Asia, Africa, or Italy and choose to live in Germania — an ugly land with a fierce climate, both miserable to behold and cultivate — unless it were his native land? ... Although the land may vary somewhat in its appearance, it is nevertheless everywhere either frightening in its forest or putrid in its swamps....

Tacitus could scarcely have given a more miserable and savage picture of the Germanic homeland. However, to the Roman imagination the rigors and unpleasantness of the northern climate are the perfect complement to the bellicose temperament presumed to characterize its inhabitants.

Sima Qian does not give quite so desolate a depiction of the Xiongnu territory. However, the Xiongnu lands are given the name “submissive wastes” 荒服 (*Shiji* 110. 2881), a term that clearly suggests that Xiongnu territory is tractless and undesirable if not uninhabitable.² In the biography of Zhufu Yan 主父偃 there is a more detailed description of the barbarian homeland. Herein, the general Wei Qing 衛青 recounts the expedition of the Qin 秦 general Meng Tian 蒙恬 during the reign of Qin Shihuang 秦始皇 (r. 221–210 B.C.) in an effort to dissuade the emperor from adopting an aggressive policy against the Xiongnu. He warns that although Meng Tian’s expedition was militarily successful, the conquest brought little benefit to the state:

² Watson’s translation. All other translations are my own.

[秦皇帝] 遂使蒙恬將兵攻胡，辟地千里，以河為境。地固澤鹵，不生五穀 (*Shiji* 112. 2954).

[The Qin Emperor] then sent Meng Tian with the army to attack the barbarians; he conquered 1000 tricents of territory and extended the border up to the Yellow River. The land acquired was entirely swamp, and the five grains could not be cultivated there.



Modern representation of a Xiongnu warrior³

³ Available at: http://www.chine-informations.com/guide/chine-hiong-nou_2777.html Accessed 30 October 2010.

Thus Tacitus and Sima Qian both stress that the barbarian territory is a wasteland not only of little value for the Roman and Chinese settlement but also unpleasant and uninviting in its aspect. With these wastelands as a backdrop, ancient readers were naturally disposed to view the actual inhabitants of such wilderness as savages who, like some species of animal, are able to survive in such inhospitable surroundings.

As noted above, there is no doubt that early Germanic societies living among their mountains, marshes, and forests must have been very different from the Xiongnu's nomadic lifestyle on the East Asian steppe. Taking this into account, the modern reader is nevertheless struck by the similarity between Tacitus and Sima Qian's descriptions of barbarian life and its stark contrasts to the sedentary existence within imperial borders. For example, the Germani's casual approach to agriculture is markedly different from that of the Romans:

arva per annos mutant, et superest ager. nec enim cum ubertate et amplitudine soli labore contendunt, ut pomaria conserant, ut prata separent, ut hortos rigent (*Germ.* 26. 50).

They change their fields throughout the years and there is always land left over. For they do not struggle in laboring amid the fertility and bounty of the earth, such that they should sow orchards, clear space for meadows, and water gardens.

To a first-century Roman, the notion of fertile land left uncultivated or uninhabited would have seemed not only wasteful but also indicative of cultural inferiority. Since the Punic Wars, the first time Rome was forced to mobilize the resources of the entire Italian peninsula in support of a war effort, the Romans had learned to maximize agricultural return from all of their lands. In contrast to their northeastern neighbors, the Romans were highly conscious of the value of land and the necessity of its systematic cultivation for the stability of the state. White has argued that "Throughout Roman history land remained the major, and indeed the only respectable, form of investment. The entire administrative structure of the Empire rested on the foundation of an agricultural surplus" (11–12). The Germani, however, engaged as they primarily were in sporadic

tribal warfare whose combatants only rarely coalesced into loose federations for the duration of a campaign, saw little to be gained from such disciplined toil in their fields.

The Germani showed little enthusiasm for the farmer's life amidst the "bounty of the earth," and the Xiongnu were likewise no tillers of the soil. Theirs was a nomadic, pastoral society, so it is no surprise (as Sima Qian points out) that the Xiongnu lacked any interest in permanent settlement, which was a necessary precondition to the cultivation of arable land in the central plains of China:

隨畜牧而轉移.... 逐水草遷徙, 毋城郭常處耕田之業 (*Shiji* 110. 2879).

Their wanderings follow their herds.... [and they] migrate according to the availability of water and pasture; [they] lack regularly inhabited, fortified cities and have no practice of agriculture.

Tacitus states that "it is common knowledge that none of the Germani live in populated cities and that they do not even allow their dwellings to touch one another": *Nullas Germanorum populis urbes habitari satis notum est, ne pati quidem inter se iunctas sedes* (*Germ.* 16. 45). Not only content to keep their lands free of urban sprawl, the Germani prefer to "settle in remote and isolated places wherever a fountain or field or grove might catch their fancy": *colunt discreti ac diversi, ut fons, ut campus, ut nemus placuit* (*Germ.* 16. 45). This image of a landscape-charmed Germanus choosing his abode because of the surrounding scenery stands in marked contrast to the Roman assessment of land according to its arability. And again, in contrast to the cramped conditions of Roman cities and towns, Tacitus emphasizes the Germanic desire for personal space:

suam quisque domum spatio circumdat, sive adversus casus ignis remedium sive inscitia aedificandi. ne caementorum quidem apud illos aut tegularum usus; materia ad omnia utuntur informi et citra speciem aut delectationem (*Germ.* 16. 45).

Each of them surrounds his house with an open space, whether as protection against accidental fire or due to an ignorance of architecture. Not even the use of stones for building or tiles is known to them: all of their timber is rough-hewn and falls short of either beauty or charm.

Regardless of whether it is due to concern for the dangers of fire or sheer ignorance of engineering and design, Tacitus points out the great discrepancy between the crude simplicity of a Germanic settlement and the massive and awe-inspiring structures which adorned the centers of the Greco-Roman world.

Sima Qian gives a similar description of the Xiongnu distaste for any building that requires unnecessary effort and expenditure or supercedes immediate utility. In contrast to the Chinese who live in towns and cities, "the Xiongnu neither build fortifications nor live in cities": 匈奴無城郭之居 (*Shiji* 112. 2954). In the speech of Zhonghang Yue 中行說, a Xiongnu minister of Chinese ethnicity, Sima Qian goes so far as to indirectly criticize the architecturally prolific Chinese.⁴ Zhonghang Yue argues that the great excess in Chinese building projects is necessarily harmful to the state:

而室屋之極，生力必屈 (*Shiji* 110. 2900).

The extreme preoccupation with building construction must certainly cripple the strength and productivity [of the people].

He goes on to point out the futility and waste that results from Chinese construction projects,

⁴ I follow Di Cosmo's suggestion that Sima Qian used Zhonghang Yue as a vehicle to express sentiments of which he himself would not dare to claim authorship: "Ssu-ma Ch'ien [Sima Qian], however, feared censorship, and in the colophon to chapter 110 he admitted that he was not free to speak openly. . . . In Ssu-ma's description of the Hsiung-nu [Xiongnu] customs we can therefore distinguish two types of information. The first type, direct, is information that Ssu-ma Ch'ien provided himself, whereas the second, indirect, is information reported by him as other people's opinion. In the latter case, it is possible that Ssu-ma Ch'ien was expressing his own thoughts using other people's names to avoid blame or to add greater weight to the opinions expressed" (Di Cosmo 272). Though it may be disputed that Sima Qian himself subscribed to the views he attributes to Zhonghang Yue, Han Anguo, Wei Qing, and Li Si, he at least saw fit to include them in his work.

arguing that these activities, which should supposedly protect the people, only exhaust the population while taking up time that could be spent in military exercise, thus ultimately leaving the state in a more vulnerable position than before:

築城郭以自備, 故其民急則不習戰功, 緩則罷於作業 (*Shiji* 110. 2900).

The building of cities and fortifications for protection results in the excessive activity of the common people such that when a crisis occurs they have no time for military training; and when they are at peace with their enemies they are exhausted by their industry.

Thus both Tacitus and Sima Qian not only point out barbarian reluctance to live in permanent settlements, but also give us an image of barbarian freedom in contrast to the crowded layout of Roman cities and the excessive manual labor required of Chinese citizens. Although they write with a tone of superiority when confronted with barbarian simplicity, one senses a latent admiration for the immediate convenience and practicality of the barbarians' unfettered way of life. In the case of the Xiongnu, the contrast presented is even more striking, for Sima Qian not only shows the comparative ease of barbarian lifestyle but also explicitly points out the misery produced by the empire's conscript labor.

To ancient ethnographers, literacy was an essential criterion in determining whether or not a society could be considered civilized. It therefore comes as no surprise that Tacitus and Sima Qian both mention the absence of letters from Germanic and Xiongnu culture. Although Tacitus does give an account of what some claim to have been runic letters in divination practices amongst the Germani, he tells us that they keep no written records. It is rather the Germanic custom that they "celebrate their autochthonous god Tuisto in ancient songs which, among them, is the only form of record and testament": *Celebrant carminibus antiquis, quod unum apud illos memoriae et annalium genus est, Tuistonem deum terra editum* (*Germ.* 2. 38). He later suggests, as discussed below, that Germanic ignorance of the "secrets of letters," *litterarum secreta*, helps them preserve their marital fidelity (*Germ.* 19. 47).

Sima Qian notes in his initial introduction to Xiongnu society that they "have no writing

or books and that they use the spoken word for their agreements and contracts": 毋文書, 以言語爲約束 (*Shiji* 110. 2879). To Chinese and Romans alike, an absence of written language would have been among the clearest indicators of a given culture's inferiority. Accordingly, both historians call our attention to this essential difference between themselves and the barbarians, a distinction which served to degrade unequivocally the cultural prestige of the Germani and Xiongnu.

Given the fact that the Germani and Xiongnu posed the greatest military threats to the Roman and Chinese empires during the lifetimes of Tacitus and Sima Qian, it is no surprise to find in both the *Germania* and the *Shiji* frequent reference to the martial prowess and lifestyle of these two peoples. As the Germani and Xiongnu were such formidable enemies to their respective neighbors, it follows that ethnographers would emphasize what seemed to them the barbarians' near-obsession with warfare and weaponry.

Tacitus tells how the Germani always take their place in councils with their weapons (*armati considunt* [*Germ.* 11. 43]) and that "no issue, whether private or pertaining to the state, is transacted unless they are armed": *Nihil autem neque publicae neque privatae rei nisi armati agunt* (*Germ.* 13. 44). He draws a particular distinction between Roman and Germanic custom with his description of the coming of age ritual for the young man:

tum in ipso concilio vel principium aliquis vel pater vel propinqui scuto
frameaque iuvenem ornant: haec apud illos toga, hic primus iuventae honos ...
(*Germ.* 13. 44).

Then in the assembly itself, one of the chiefs or the [the youth's] father or relatives present the young man with the shield and spear. Amongst them this is the toga, the first honor of youth....

In this most important of rituals, that of a youth's entrance into adulthood, the Germanic custom revolves around the presentation of weapons, in contrast to the Roman ritual, where it is the reception of the toga, the Roman symbol of civilization, which is bereft of military significance, that marks and defines the transition into one's majority. As Rives points out, this

image of the Germanic fondness for weapons was a familiar theme in Tacitus' day, and the historian's own work echoes the words of Seneca: "What is more violent than the Germani? What is fiercer in an attack? What is more desirous of arms, amongst which they are born and raised, whose sole care is for weapons with all other things neglected"?⁵

In like fashion, Sima Qian offers a picture of the Xiongnu as a people who are also accustomed to have their weapons always within arm's reach. The symbolic weapon of the Xiongnu was the bow, and they accordingly excelled at archery, a martial skill that, combined with their superior horsemanship, was responsible for the crushing defeats dealt the Chinese in their early wars with the Xiongnu: "The essential element of the Xiongnu army was the cavalry.... All the young and strong men in their country who were able to draw the bow were conscripted as cavalry soldiers. When the army was mobilized, the warriors served as mounted archers whose primary function was to fire [at the enemy]" (Ma 55).⁶ Sima Qian relates that "as adolescents" they begin to sharpen their skills while "hunting foxes and rabbits": 少長，則射狐兔; thus as adults "the warriors are able to draw the bow and all serve as armored cavalry": 士力能毋弓，盡爲甲騎 (*Shiji* 110. 2879).

Such fondness for weapons naturally accompanies assertions of these peoples' passion for warfare and violence. Tacitus offers a lengthy passage on the Germanic penchant for waging war:

si civitas in qua orti sunt longa pace et otio torpeat, plerique nobilium adolescentium petunt ultro eas nationes quae tum bellum aliquod gerunt, quia et ingrata genti quies et facilius inter ancipitia clarescunt magnumque comitatum non nisi vi belloque tueare. exigunt enim principis sui liberalitate illum bellatorem equum, illam cruentam victricemque frameam: nam epulae et quamquam incompti largi tamen apparatus pro stipendio cedunt. Materia munificentiae per bella et raptus, nec arare terram aut expectare annum tam facile persuaseris quam

⁵ *Germanis quid est animosius? Quid ad incursum acrius? Quid armorum cupidius, quibus innascuntur innutriunturque, quorum unica illis cura est in alia neglegentibus?* (*De Ira* I.11.132).

⁶ 匈奴的軍隊主要是騎兵... 国内男子少壯而能挽弓者便都被編为騎兵. 行軍之時, 騎士挽弓騎馬主射擊.

vocare hostem et vulnera mereri; pigrum quin immo et iners videtur sudore
acquirere quod possis sanguine parare (*Germ.* 14. 44–45).

If the state in which they were born should become sluggish through a long period of peace and leisure, many of the noble young men will, of their own accord, seek other nations which are then waging a war themselves. For tranquility is unwelcome to this race and they distinguish themselves more easily in the midst of danger. They are unable to maintain a group of followers except in the midst of violence and war. It is from the generosity of their chieftain that they collect that war-horse and that bloodstained and conquering spear. For they accept feasts and plentiful equipment, crude though it may be, as their payment. The opportunity for this generosity comes through war and plunder. Nor could you so easily persuade them to plow the earth and wait for crops as to call forth their enemies and distinguish themselves with wounds. And indeed on the contrary it seems lazy and weak to acquire through sweat what you should be able to get through blood.

In this passage one can't help notice the relish with which Tacitus tells of the gory Germanic spear and the Germani's willingness to sacrifice their own blood sooner than their sweat in the pursuit of a livelihood. By Tacitus' time, Rome had expanded its empire nearly to its greatest extent, having long-since replaced its system of conscripted citizen or allied farmers, pulled from work in their fields for the duration of a campaign, with professional armies whose soldiers served for a period of sixteen years (Southern 91–99). This contrast with the barbarian who only knows how to fight but lacks the foresight to prepare for a military campaign was not only clear to Tacitus but also to any Roman general who faced the Germani in the field.

Sima Qian also emphasizes that the Xiongnu are excessively warlike by their very nature. Zhonghang Yue in his dialogue with a Chinese envoy says right from the beginning that “the Xiongnu are certainly experts in warfare”: 匈奴明以戰功爲事 (*Shiji* 110. 2899). Moreover, he suggests that for the Xiongnu the military lifestyle extends so far as to determine filial relationships and, from the Chinese Confucian perspective, turn these relationships upside down.

For according to Sima Qian, amongst the Xiongnu it is the custom for “the young and strong to eat the fatty and delicious food and the elderly to eat what is left over. Thus they value the strong and healthy and despise the elderly and weak”: 壯者食肥美, 老者食其餘. 貴壯健, 賤老弱 (*Shiji* 110. 2879). When a Chinese envoy accuses the Xiongnu of what, in his eyes, is a barbaric and despicable practice, Zhonghang Yue retorts that this custom is in fact in the best interests of the elderly:

其老弱不能鬪, 故以其肥美飲食壯健者, 蓋以自爲守衛, 如此父子各得久相保, 何以言匈奴輕老也? (*Shiji* 110. 2899–2900)

The elderly [of the Xiongnu] are unable to fight. Therefore we give their fatty and delicious food to the young and strong, and thus the elderly may be protected and defended. In this way are both able to protect one another for a long time. So how can you say that the Xiongnu do not respect the elderly?

As with the Germani, Xiongnu society’s defining activity is warfare, and in their case it is so important as to dictate familial relations — resulting in an inversion of what the Chinese would have considered to be the civilized, hierarchical arrangement mandated by Confucianism, adherence to which was held up as the absolute barometer of moral cultivation and virtue. The twentieth-century scholar Lin Gan summarizes the centrality of warfare in Xiongnu society and the prestige enjoyed by those to whom its prosecution was entrusted: “The standard by which [Xiongnu] society evaluated an individual was based on the impact of his labor and military performance (especially his military performance). Those who when young and strong were able to distinguish themselves with their labor and, particularly, their military performance earned the esteem of their society, whereas the weak and elderly did not (156).”⁷ By revealing such a contrary practice and then defending its merits, Sima Qian not only points out the discrepancy between Chinese and Xiongnu social norms but also suggests that perhaps the Confucian model is not so infallible as Chinese scholars claimed.

⁷ 社会对于一个人的衡量, 也是以他在劳动和战斗中 (特别是战斗中) 所起的作用为标准. 年青力壮, 能在劳动中特别在战斗中有所表现的就受到社会的重视, 年老体弱的则否.

No description of a barbarian people would be complete without graphic images to illustrate the ferocity of these wild adversaries in action. The Romans of Tacitus' day all knew of the disaster of A.D. 9, when three whole legions were massacred in the swampy forests of Germania on a campaign east of the Rhine. Likewise, the Chinese knew of the general Li Ling 李陵 who allowed himself to be lured too far out onto the Xiongnu grasslands and suffered a humiliating defeat. It is therefore not surprising that Tacitus and Sima Qian should give detailed accounts of barbarian prowess on the battlefield.

Though Tacitus notes that Germani tactics were comparatively unsophisticated compared with Roman maneuvers, their courage in battle was impressive to the Romans. He uses what he considered to be the Germanic heroic code to illustrate the absolute centrality of warfare in their society:

scutum reliquisse praecipuum flagitium, nec aut sacris adesse aut concilium inire ignominioso fas, multique superstites bellorum infamiam laqueo finierunt (*Germ.* 6. 41).

To have left behind one's shield is the ultimate disgrace, nor is it considered proper for one so shamed to be present at sacrifices or to participate in councils. Many survivors of wars put an end to their shame by hanging themselves.

Tacitus goes on to tell us that the Germani compete against one another for the most courageous performance on the battlefield. Though the Romans had a defined system of reward and punishment according to a legionary's behavior in battle, Germanic valor, as Tacitus would have his audience believe, is motivated purely by the imperatives of a heroic ethic:

Cum ventum in aciem, turpe principi virtute vinci, turpe comitatus virtutem principis non adaequare. iam vero infame in omnem vitam ac probrosum superstitem principi suo ex acie recessisse; illum defendere tueri, sua quoque fortia facta gloriae eius adsignare praecipuum sacramentum est ... (*Germ.* 14. 44).

When they come into battle, it is only with shame that a chieftain should be bested [by his men] in courage, and only with shame that the soldier should not be equal in valor to his commanders. For truly it is a notorious and disgraceful thing, lasting throughout a survivor's whole life, to have left the battlefield and his chieftain. But to defend and protect him, and to devote their own deeds to his glory is their principal sacrament....

In the above two passages there is an undisguised admiration for Germanic bravery and constancy. What commander would not wish for soldiers so devoted as these? Though there is a suggestion that the martial obsession of the Germani is indicative of their cultural simplicity, Tacitus clearly believes that there is also a nobility in their devotion and steadfastness of purpose which is worthy of his praise. Moreover, there is a suggestion that, whilst Romans require external incentives or deterrents as a means of regulating individual behavior, the Germanic warrior follows what is to him a moral imperative. This theme of ethical principle as a means to social regulation is one that will be discussed below in the context of Germanic marital relations. Though the above depiction of the Germani on the battlefield is a noble one, Tacitus also includes more fantastic images of Germanic warriors, as may be seen in his account of the Harli tribe:

nigra scuta, tincta corpora; atras ad proelia noctes legunt ipsaque formidine atque umbra feralis exercitus terrorem inferunt, nullo hostium sustinente novum ac velut infernum adspectum ... (*Germ.* 43. 59).

Their shields are black and their bodies dyed black. They choose dark nights for their battles and in shadow they bring the terror of a ghostly army. None of their enemies is able to withstand such an unusual and ghostly sight....

Though the Xiongnu may not present such a visually frightening aspect as the Harli, a recurrent theme in the *Shiji* is the versatility and speed of Xiongnu cavalry. The Chinese minister Han Anguo 韓安國 warns against attacking the Xiongnu because of the formidable skill and tactics of these master horsemen:

今匈奴負戎馬之足, 懷禽獸之心, 遷徙鳥舉, 難得而制也 (*Shiji* 108. 2861).

These days the Xiongnu soldiers are borne by the legs of their war-horses and possess the hearts of wild animals. They come and go like flocks of birds so it is difficult to catch and control them.

This passage introduces a theme that recurs with frequency in Sima Qian’s depictions of the Xiongnu: the reduction of these horsemen to the status of animals.⁸ In this case we are told that the Xiongnu have the hearts of wild animals and earlier in the *Shiji* there is the comment that “From the ancient times, [the Xiongnu] have not belonged to the human race”: [匈奴] 自上古不屬爲人 (*Shiji* 108. 2861). There are numerous references to Xiongnu military strategy in the *Shiji* that employ animal imagery, and these are some of Sima Qian’s most evocative descriptions of the style of warfare endemic among steppe peoples:

善為誘兵以冒敵. 故其見敵則逐利, 如鳥之集; 其困敗, 則瓦解雲散矣 (*Shiji* 110. 2892).

[The Xiongnu] are skilled at luring enemy troops in pursuit in order to expose the enemy. Then when the enemy is in sight, they attack from all sides like a flock of

⁸ The ethnonyms Germani and Xiongnu 匈奴 warrant some attention. Though the proper name *Germani* does not seem to be of Roman origin (Wolfram 4), to Roman ears it would nevertheless have sounded a great deal like the adjective *germanus* meaning “true, real, proper, brotherly, sisterly” as well as the noun *germanitas* meaning “the relationship between brothers and sisters” and “affinity between things deriving from the same source.” *Xiongnu* is a compound of two characters that were a phonological representation in Chinese characters of a Xiongnu word(s). The first, 匈, when geminated, was a word describing chaotic noise (吵嚷声) or disorderly behavior (動亂的樣子). Wang Li cites an example from the *Zhuangzi* wherein the sage Guangchengzi 廣成子 attacks the modes of government established by the Three Sage Emperors: ““Since those three ages, there has been nothing but noise and fuss”: 自三代以下者, 匈匈焉” (*Zaiyou*,” *Zhuangzi*. 268). The second character, 奴, simply meant “slave” but could also be used pejoratively. For a discussion of the relationship between the Chinese transcription Xiongnu 匈奴 and the name “Hun,” see Étienne de la Vaissière, <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/xiongnu> and the references listed there.

birds. When they are pressed in battle, they scatter and disperse like drifting clouds.

In another instance, Sima Qian recounts how the minister Wei Qing warns the Chinese emperor against an attack on the Xiongnu, using similar imagery to give the Xiongnu an almost elemental and ethereal quality:

夫匈奴之性, 獸聚而鳥散, 從之如搏影 (*Shiji* 112. 2955).

It is the nature of the Xiongnu to gather together like beasts and scatter like birds. To try and pursue them is like trying to strike a shadow.

In regard to descriptions of Germanic and Xiongnu performance in the field, it is worth pointing out one significant difference: while Tacitus cannot say enough about Germanic courage and solidarity, Sima Qian tells us that "when the Xiongnu are engaged in warfare, each man looks to his own profit": 故其戰, 人人自爲趣利 (*Shiji* 110. 2892). And in contrast to Germanic intractability noted above, the Xiongnu are quick to run if the tide turns against them:

利則進, 不利則退, 不羞遁走. 苟利所在, 不知禮儀 (*Shiji* 110. 2879).

When they have the advantage they attack, and when they are pressed they retreat. For they think there is no shame in flight. Wherever they see profit, they know no courtesy or justice.

Though formidable adversaries in different ways, the Germani and Xiongnu gave their civilized contemporaries ample opportunity to marvel and shudder at their prowess on the battlefield. In this respect, Tacitus is more complementary towards the Germani than Sima Qian is towards the Xiongnu, and he certainly never goes so far as to deny their humanity; however, he and Sima Qian are alike in that they both give repeated descriptions, at times almost fantastic, of the barbarians' military might and the fear it duly inspires.

Yet accompanying such colorful testimony of barbarian bellicosity, both historians are also quick to point out the flipside of the tribal war machine: indolence and laziness in times of

peace. Tacitus and Sima Qian call attention to the lack of industry, or what they would perhaps have considered to be the arts of civilization, in the off-season. In contrast to the Roman farmer, artisan, or craftsman, the Germanic warrior seems to have had few claims on his time when not on the battlefield:

Quotiens bella non ineunt, 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 ... (*Germ.* 15. 45).

Whenever they are not engaged in warfare, they spend much time hunting but even more in idleness, given over to sleeping and eating. The bravest and most warlike of them do nothing and all duties of family, home, and field are given over to the women, and elderly and weak members of the household; the warriors themselves are unoccupied....

This particular detail, the delegation of labor to the weak and elderly members of the household, is reminiscent of the Xiongnu custom of reserving the most nutritious food for the young warriors. In each case the warrior is given preferential treatment, for it is his contribution in warfare that is the most esteemed by society — all other duties and considerations are left to those unable to bear arms. Tacitus marvels at these extremes of the Germanic personality, that “the same men should be so enamored of indolence yet so hostile towards peace and quiet”: *idem homines sic ament inertiam et oderint quietem* (*Germ.* 15. 45).

Sima Qian paints a similar picture of the carefree lifestyle amongst the Xiongnu when they are not busy violating treaties and carrying out plundering raids. In Zhonghang Yue’s dialogue with the Chinese envoy where, as noted above, he tells us that the Xiongnu’s primary occupation is warfare (匈奴明以戰功爲事), it follows that when Xiongnu warriors are not on campaign they may do what they like (*Shiji* 110. 2899):

故其急則人習騎射, 寬則人樂無事 (*Shiji* 110. 2900).

In times of warfare all the men train in cavalry maneuvers and archery; in times of leisure they are happy and do what they wish.

This statement reveals the contrast of this way of life to the conscript labor imposed upon Chinese citizens when they were not engaged in military service. Zhonghang Yue continues with a criticism of the hustle and bustle of Chinese society, and the incessant activity necessary to produce the monuments and arts of civilization:

夫力耕桑以求衣食, 築城郭以自備, 故其民急則不習戰功, 緩則罷於作業 (*Shiji* 110. 2900).

Therefore, the fact that [the Chinese] use much effort to plant crops and mulberry trees in order to have fine clothes and fine food, and build cities and fortifications for protection results in the excessive activity of the common people such that when a crisis occurs they have no time for military training; and when they are at peace with their enemies they are exhausted by their industry.

Zhonghang Yue argues that, in the case of the Chinese, “‘The extreme preoccupation with building construction must certainly cripple the strength and productivity [of the people]’”: 而室屋之極, 生力必屈 (*Shiji* 110. 2900). While Sima Qian on the one hand paints such a miserable image of Chinese conscript labor and toil for the state, on the other he offers the freedom of Xiongnu society as an appealing alternative — not only for its lack of social restraints but also for the relative security such a mobile society could enjoy. Wei Qing, in his admonition against attacking the Xiongnu, quotes the Qin minister Li Si 李斯 who points out the fluid nature of Xiongnu settlement and its natural resilience against the threat of military subjugation:

夫匈奴無城郭之居, 委積之守, 遷徙鳥舉, 難得而制也 (*Shiji* 112. 2954).

The Xiongnu have no dwellings in cities or fortifications and do not store any supplies. They come and go as birds and are therefore most difficult to capture and control.

As one would expect, both the Germani and Xiongnu have a simple diet in comparison with that of their civilized neighbors (though the Germani’s excessive love of alcohol is not mirrored by the Xiongnu). Tacitus tells us that the Germani’s “food is simple, [consisting of] wild fruits, fresh game, or congealed milk”: *cibi simplices, agrestia poma, recens fera aut lac concretum* (*Germ.* 23. 49); “they satisfy their hunger without pomp or blandishment”: *sine apparatu, sine blandimentis expellunt famem* (*Germ.* 23. 49). Tacitus uses the modest requirements of the Germanic palate to criticize the lavishness of the Roman table. As Sherwin-White points out, this comparison of barbarian simplicity with Roman excess is a wistful reminder of the frugality associated with the customs of the early Republic: “While the author certainly admires the barbarians for the virtues which he thinks they possess, these were not barbarian virtues of courage and toughness, as in Caesar, but those ancient civilized virtues of which Roman writers had long been deploring their own loss” (40).

Likewise, the Xiongnu’s subsistence would have seemed simple and primitive to a Chinese audience. Sima Qian quotes Zhonghang Yue, saying that “It is the Xiongnu custom to eat the meat of their livestock and drink their milk”: 匈奴之俗, 人食畜肉, 飲其汁 (*Shiji* 110. 2900).

Not only are the culinary tastes of the Germani and Xiongnu simple, but also their clothing is practical and unadorned. Whereas the Germani “wear the pelts of wild beasts,” *gerunt et ferarum pelles*, the “Xiongnu ... wear the skins [of their livestock]”: 匈奴 ... 衣其皮 (*Germ.* 17. 46; *Shiji* 110. 2900). Yet within this comparative lack of sophistication, there is an assumed strength in barbarian austerity — and along with this strength is a naïveté that Romans and Chinese astutely noticed could be exploited. Tacitus mentions the Germanic fondness for their native alcoholic drink, but he suggests that to supply them with as much drink as they covet (i.e. the stronger Roman wine) would render them defenseless in war:

Si indulseris ebrietati suggerendo quantum concupiscunt, haud minus facile vitiis quam armis vincentur (*Germ.* 23. 49).

If you should indulge their drunkenness with as much supply as they desire, they will be defeated scarcely less easily by their own vice than with arms.

Sima Qian also mentions the weakening effect Chinese goods could have on the Xiongnu. Zhonghang Yue urges the Xiongnu not to be drawn to the delicate Chinese fashions and customs, warning that to adopt such foreign ways would be their undoing:

今單于變俗好漢物 ... 則匈奴盡歸於漢矣. 其得漢繒絮, 以馳草棘中, 衣袴裂敝, 以示不如旃裘之完善也. 得漢食物皆去之, 以示不如湏酪之便美也 (*Shiji* 110. 2899).

These days the Shanyu [leader of the Xiongnu state] is changing our customs and covets Chinese goods ... with the result that the Xiongnu will eventually pledge their allegiance to the Chinese. When one receives Chinese textiles he should wear clothing made from them while riding among the grass and brambles; the shirt and trousers will be torn and ruined. Thereby one may see that they are inferior to our excellent fabrics and skins. When one receives Chinese food items, he must throw them away. Thereby one may see that they are inferior to our convenient and delicious milk and cheese.

In both the *Germania* and the *Shiji* one senses that, with the exception of the Germanic propensity for alcohol abuse, the authors commend and admire the frugality and simplicity of the societies they are describing. It is clear from the passages above that Tacitus and Sima Qian espoused the assumption that civilization with its accompanying wealth and luxury could weaken a people's natural vigor and virtue.

In the eyes of two historians living in two of the largest empires of the ancient world, both famed for the elaborateness of their laws and complexity of their administrations, the Germanic and Xiongnu tribesman seemed to enjoy a degree of self-determination that the Roman and Chinese official could only dream of. Both historians are critical of the seemingly chaotic and disordered functions of barbarian society. Yet one nevertheless detects a trace of envy, a yearning for a simpler life, in the voices of the two city-dwellers. Indeed, to long for the freedom of a bird, an animal with which the Xiongnu are so often compared, is hardly a novel wish.

Tacitus is impressed by the degree of constraint Germanic society exerts over its leaders'

powers when he says that "the power of kings is neither absolute nor infinite": *nec regibus infinita aut libera potestas* (*Germ.* 7. 41). Moreover, he is struck by their quasi-democratic method of governance:

De minoribus rebus principes consultant, de maioribus omnes, ita tamen ut ea quoque quorum penes plebem arbitrium est apud principes praetractentur (*Germ.* 11. 43).

Smaller matters, the chieftains discuss with one another, but more important decisions involve everyone. However, it is nevertheless such that those things to be decided by the common people are also first discussed amongst the chieftains.

The Germani, desirous of open spaces, lived at considerable distance from one another and spread over a large area. Thus Tacitus refers to their almost excessive freedom as a potential vice, seeing as it takes them so long to gather for the deliberation of business:

illud ex libertate vitium, quod non simul nec ut iussi conveniunt, sed et alter et tertius dies cunctatione coeuntium absumitur. ut turbae placuit, considunt armati (*Germ.* 11. 43).

It is a failing of their freedom that they do not come together at the same time nor as they have been commanded. A second and third day may be used up in waiting for them to arrive. They sit down as they please with their weapons on them.

Though Tacitus would have been critical of Germanic inefficiency and the clear disadvantages it would have entailed when their tribal confederations were mobilizing for war, he nevertheless admires the Germani's respect for a freeman to come and go as he pleased. Even among the Gotones tribe where the practice of kingship was more established, Tacitus claims that the power of the monarchy does not deprive the common man of his freedom:

Trans Lugios Gotones regnantur, paulo iam adductius quam ceterae Germanorum gentes, nondum tamen supra libertatem (*Germ.* 44. 59).

Beyond the Lugii the Gotones are ruled, somewhat more strictly than the other German peoples, however never such that they lose their liberty.

Like the Germani, the Xiongnu have a freedom, enviable to Sima Qian, to come and go as they wish. We have seen above how the Xiongnu are accustomed to "move their settlements as their herds require.... [and they] migrate according to the availability of pasture and water": 隨畜牧而轉移.... 逐水草遷徙 (*Shiji* 110. 2879). In addition to their geographical freedom, the Xiongnu also enjoy a life with very few social restraints in comparison to the Chinese. In Zhonghang Yue's dialogue with the Chinese envoy he argues that "the restraints and requirements of Xiongnu people are light and easy to fulfill": 其約束輕, 易行也 (*Shiji* 110. 2900). This point has already been illustrated above with the image of Chinese farmers forced to spend their lives in exhausting toil — whether in the fields or in building projects for the state. In his description of Xiongnu law, Sima Qian gives the following summary:

有罪小者輒, 大者死. 獄久者不過十日, 一國之囚不過數人 (*Shiji* 110. 2892).

For small crimes, one is beaten. For large crimes he is executed. A long prison sentence does not extend beyond ten days, and in the entire country there are no more than a small number of prisoners.

This passage would have particularly caught the attention of Sima Qian's contemporaries due to the contrast it presents between Chinese and Xiongnu law. In this case, Watson believes that "Sima Qian is inviting a comparison with the situation in China in his own day, when the jails were full to overflowing with men awaiting sentence" (137). Moreover, Sima Qian himself had personally experienced the brutality of the legal system: he was imprisoned for having offended the emperor and had undergone the humiliating punishment of castration.

Zhonghang Yue goes on to criticize the complexity of Chinese government and administration, pointing out that "the Xiongnu structure of authority is exceedingly simple, since the governance of the entire nation rests on one man": 君臣簡易, 一國之政猶一身也 (*Shiji* 110. 2900). In the examples above, one sees Sima Qian's clearest admiration for the barbarian way of life, an admiration summarized by Di Cosmo: "The egalitarian, simple, harsh

but fair, and above all free existence of the nomads acquires a special attractiveness only by contrast with that of the Chinese subject, whose life is fettered by many laws and endangered by cruel punishments and whimsical law enforcers" (276).

In the above descriptions of the Germani and Xiongnu, Tacitus and Sima Qian, while acknowledging the at times chaotic structure of barbarian society, do not hesitate to express admiration for its native systems of social regulation and governance. Indeed Tacitus claims that the Germani have a moral code that is superior to current Roman mores when he says that "good morals are more effective there than good laws are elsewhere": *plusque ibi boni mores valent quam alibi bonae leges* (*Germ.* 19. 47). While laws are seen as defining features of the civilized state, Tacitus can't help but notice that Germanic tribal custom results in behavior more upright, in Roman eyes, than Roman litigiousness. He emphasizes this point with his comment on the steadfast fidelity and chastity he observes amongst the Germani in contrast to the frequent adultery of upper-class Roman circles:

Ergo saepta pudicitia agunt, nullis spectaculorum inlecebris, nullis conviviorum irritationibus corruptae. litterarum secreta viri pariter ac feminae ignorant. paucissima in tam numerosa gente adulteria.... nemo enim illic vitia ridet, nec corrumpere et corrumpi saeculum vocatur (*Germ.* 19. 47).

Therefore they [Germanic women] behave according to a guarded chastity. They are corrupted by no allurements of theaters and no incitements from feasts. The men and women are equally ignorant of secret letters. Adultery is extremely rare for such a populous race.... For no one laughs at vice there, nor is it called fashion to corrupt and be corrupted.

This passage is among the clearest examples in the *Germania* of what Rives considers to have been one of the earliest uses of ethnographic works: to serve "as a springboard for observations about civilization and the corruption that it could entail" (51). It is a widely accepted view that Tacitus used passages like this in the *Germania* to call attention to the moral decline of Roman society and its departure from the austere virtue of its founders. However, it

does not necessarily follow therefore that Tacitus' claims of Germanic chastity are unfounded — accounts ranging from Caesar in the first century B.C. to Salvian in the fifth century A.D. tell of the strict moral code of Germanic society. As Tacitus hearkens back to the simple piety of his Roman ancestors with his account of Germanic virtue, perhaps Sima Qian, in his apology for the Xiongnu, seeks to invoke the memory of the most venerated fathers of Chinese cultures: Yao 尧 and Shun 舜, who were themselves of "barbarian," or *yi* 夷, origin (Qian 380).

The Xiongnu, however, had marriage practices that were somewhat suspect to their Chinese neighbors. For it was a Xiongnu custom that "when a man dies his son marries his step-mother; likewise when a son dies one of his brothers marries his widow": 父死, 妻其後母; 兄死, 皆娶其妻妻之 (*Shiji* 110. 2900). This custom attracted criticism from the Chinese as is seen in the exchange between the Chinese envoy and Zhonghang Yue. Yet Sima Qian is aware of the logic behind this Xiongnu custom for which Zhonghang Yue gives the following defense and return criticism:

父子兄弟死, 取其妻妻之, 惡種姓之失也. 故匈奴雖亂, 必立宗種. 今中國雖詳, 不取其父兄之妻, 親屬益疏則相殺, 至乃易姓 (*Shiji* 110. 2900).

When a man dies — be he father, son, elder brother, or younger brother — the fact that his widow is taken as a wife of one of the others is because they cannot tolerate the disappearance of a family's lineage. Therefore although the Xiongnu may be disorderly, they certainly establish [and esteem] their ancestry. Today, the Central Kingdom [China] is merely hypocritical: by not marrying the widow of one's father or brother, kin become more estranged and then kill one another, even to the point of changing surnames.

The Chinese criticism, based on Confucian principles of filial piety, has been refuted: the Xiongnu customs not only honor their ancestors but preserve stability in their society, eliminating a common cause of strife amongst the Chinese. The modern scholar Liu Xueyao gives this passage the highest praise: "Excellent! The words of Zhonghang Yue have perfectly illustrated that the various customs of the Xiongnu are suited to the requirements for survival in

their environment. To put it another way, the customs of the Xiongnu, as far as they themselves are concerned, are the best possible ones for their situation (73)."⁹ This passage is also remarkable in that Sima Qian offers the controversial suggestion that the Chinese rigid social order may not be the sole means of constructing a harmonious society.

Where Tacitus argues that amongst the Germani moral fortitude governs conduct as well as laws do in other states (implicitly Rome), Sima Qian points out the hypocrisy inherent in the Chinese reliance on ritual dress and conduct to encourage virtue. The Chinese envoy accuses the Xiongnu of "lacking the refinement of ritual headdress and the proper rites of the court": 無冠帶之飾, 闕庭之禮 (*Shiji* 110. 2900). However, Zhonghang Yue retorts that these rites of the Chinese only serve to "produce resentment and ambition between the levels of society," 上下交怨望, and after a detailed criticism of the failings of Chinese society asks the mocking question, "what indeed is the use of ritual headdress anyway?": 冠固何當 (*Shiji* 110. 2900).

The above remark is perhaps the most cutting of criticisms directed against the complexities of civilized society — Sima Qian praises the Xiongnu by showing what they are not, i.e. encumbered by an elaborate system of ritual and rites which serve only to distinguish those who enjoy wealth and education from those who do not. Tacitus, at the end of the *Germania*, having given an account of as many tribes as he knew of, exhibits his greatest admiration for *barbaricum* in a passage not devoted to a branch of the Germani but to one of the outermost people known to the Romans: the Fenni,¹⁰ a tribe which lives in what he calls "wondrous savagery," *mira feritas* (*Germ.* 46. 62). For the Fenni have no weapons and keep no horses; lacking iron, they use bone tools; they use only the crudest of shelters against wild animals and the elements. Yet, according to Tacitus, the Fenni prefer their primal state:

sed beatius arbitrantur quam ingemere agris, inlaborare domibus, suas alienasque
fortunas spe metuque versare ... (*Germ.* 46. 62).

⁹ 善哉，燕人中行月之能言也，已充分說明匈奴之各種習俗，乃為適應其生存空間與生幾類型之所必須，易言之，即匈奴之各種習，於匈奴而言，乃最為適當者。

¹⁰ For a discussion of whether the Finns or Sami (Lapp) peoples of today may be equated with the Fenni or Phinnoi Φίννοι of classical authors, see Rives pp. 326–327.

But they consider it a happier fate [to live thus] rather than to groan over their fields, to slave in the household, and to mix their fortunes in hope and fear with those of others....

Though Tacitus, and no doubt many an educated Roman aristocrat, may have shuddered at the prospect of such abject poverty, he, like Sima Qian, offers the following question: can one be sure that the world of empire and city, a life of concerns, struggle, anxiety, and sacrifice, is necessarily the happiest and most valuable one?

This paper has discussed the ethnographic descriptions of two ancient barbarian peoples by two of the most important historians in Ancient Rome and China. Though the Germani and Xiongnu were no doubt peoples very different from one another, the tendency of Tacitus and Sima Qian to adhere to many of the same motifs and depictions, working as they did in two literary traditions completely isolated from one another, is striking. From vivid images of the barbarian wastelands and the cultural ignorance of these transient peoples to their prowess in warfare and attractively egalitarian lifestyle, both authors portray not only the savagery but also the nobility, as they saw it, of their uncivilized neighbors. In their works we see attitudes, predispositions, and prejudices that remind us of our own depictions through the centuries of American Indians, Australian Aboriginals, Norwegian Sami, and countless others. Though nearly two millennia have passed since the lifetimes of Tacitus and Sima Qian, it is instructive how little the perceptions of the civilized have changed towards peoples living in what they consider to be less developed cultures.

As a closing irony, it is worth pointing out Tacitus' final comment on the Fenni. It is striking for, though no doubt springing from tenets of Roman Stoicism (see also Rives 327), it is also reminiscent of the highest state of spiritual achievement proposed in the foundational Daoist texts the *Laozi* 老子 and the *Zhuangzi* 莊子, the state of 無爲而無不爲, where nothing is done but nothing is left undone; of 少私寡慾, where one has little care for one's self and minimal desire:

Securi adversus homines, securi adversus deos rem difficillimam adsecuti sunt, ut illis ne voto quidem opus esset (*Germ.* 46. 62).

Randolph Ford, "*Barbaricum Depictum: Images of the Germani and Xiongnu*"
Sino-Platonic Papers, 207 (October 2010)

Indifferent towards men and indifferent towards the gods, they have obtained the most difficult of things: that there is nothing left for them even to pray for.

Perhaps some savages, the Fenni at least, were noble savages indeed.

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