

BOOK REVIEW

A Most Dangerous Book: Tacitus's Germania from the Roman Empire to the Third Reich. By Christopher B. KREBS. New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2011. Pp. 303. \$25.95. ISBN 978-0-393-06265-6.

Tacitus composed his essay on Germany and the Germans in the year 98. We do not know why he chose this subject for his second work of that year, following the biography of his father-in-law Agricola. Krebs doubts that Tacitus had ever been in Germany, perhaps never even north of the Alps, and that the work therefore is little more than an academic exercise. Many, including the present writer, will disagree. We know that a Cornelius Tacitus was procurator in Gallia Belgica in the days of Vespasian (Pliny, *NH* 7.76), the province adjacent to Germanic territory. This man was likely the historian's father, and if he had his family with him, the son, then a teenager or even older, would have had ample opportunity to become acquainted with at least some of the lands of Germany. He was absent from Rome for four years (89–93), during which time Agricola died, and his posting might well have been along the Rhine.

If this view is valid, the essay must have had a serious purpose, beyond being merely an ethnographical study. Two sections stand out, to my mind. The first is at the beginning of chapter four: *Ipse eorum opinionibus accedo, qui Germaniae populos nullis aliis aliarum nationum coniubiis infectos propriam et sinceram et tantum sui similem gentem extitisse arbitrantur.* This is the statement which had greater effect on centuries still unborn when Tacitus wrote than perhaps any other from classical literature.

The other is at the end of 37, after Tacitus has traced the joint history of Rome and Germany, without the former having anything really to show for a common history of more than two centuries, *triumphati magis quam victi sunt.* Was this meant to be a call to the Emperor Trajan to wage war against the Germans? If so, it failed, as Trajan considered wars against first the Dacians and then the Parthians more important for the well-being and security of the empire.

In spite of Pliny the Younger's statement that Tacitus' works would be immortal (*Ep.* 7.33.1), this was not to be the case. They were essentially lost and unknown for more than a millennium. The story of the discovery and recovery of the *Germania* reads much like a detective mystery. Krebs gives a very vivid tale of

the people and events of the fifteenth century who were involved, chiefly Poggio Bracciolini and Enea Silvio Piccolomini, who would soon become Pope Pius II.

Krebs is very good in discussing political circumstances, statesmen, and writers, who played significant roles in the continuous judgments on the text and the thoughts and actions which ensued. Over time emphasis on the uniqueness of the German race grew in importance, particularly since there was no German state but rather a collection of hundreds of political entities. German dislike, or better hatred, for the Latin lands of Italy and France survived and grew from the fifteenth century to the twentieth, culminating in the Nazi regime, World War II, and the attempted extirpation of many millions of people, Jews, Slavs, gypsies, and others, who were considered racially inferior to the Germans. It was this steady interpretation, followed by actions, which caused the *Germania* to be styled “a most dangerous book.”

It was not only the *Germania* which enabled Germans to think themselves different from other people but also the discovery of the First Medicean manuscript containing *Annales I–VI*, which had its *editio princeps* in 1515. For herein appears the figure of Arminius, whom Tacitus styled *liberator haud dubie Germaniae* (2.88.2). After Ulrich von Hutten’s great work on him and Martin Luther’s equation of the name Arminius with the German *Hermann*, meaning “warrior,” Germany had at last an ancient hero. The *Germania* and Arminius, over centuries, helped mold a national identity.

Krebs’ handling of his material is masterful. Being German, he knows names and events with which others may not be acquainted. The result is a modern *libellus aureus* on an ancient one.

Yet there are some slips and questionable statements. I shall comment only on those which may mislead a reader. Heinrich Heine, born in Düsseldorf, was not exiled (22). He chose late in life to move to Paris, as, some years afterward, Jacques Offenbach did also. There were no laws concerning exile; there was anti-semitism. Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy and his family had prosperous lives in the first half of the nineteenth century, and Bismarck’s banker was a Jew.

The gap between the composition of the *Germania* and the time when it was once again read is much shorter than “almost fifteen hundred years” (56); 1325 is more precise.

The discussion of Conrad Celtis is fine, but I miss reference to his essay on the city of Nürnberg, where he had been crowned Poet Laureate of the Holy Roman Empire, entitled *Norimberga*. Form and matter were based upon Tacitus.

The “woods of Teutoburg” where the great battle occurred is now generally accepted to have been at the site of Kalkriese and its vicinity, which is in Niedersachsen (Lower Saxony), not in North Rhine-Westphalia (117). The present Polish city of Gdansk was once Danzig, not Danzio (136).

Krebs devotes considerable space to the occasion when Cardinal Michael von Faulhaber gave his New Year’s address on December 31, 1933 and spoke strongly against the National Socialist government (214–5). There is now a Kardinal-Faulhaber-Strasse honoring him not far from the great square of the Marienplatz.

Much of the chapter on the Nazi era focused upon Heinrich Himmler, head of the brutal SS. I would have welcomed some space devoted to Josef Goebbels, the propaganda minister, who had a doctorate in history. Did he employ the *Germania* to any extent, or did he refer to it at all?

Krebs speaks of the outrage which met the discussion of the *Germania* by Eduard Norden in his splendid book, *Die germanische Urgeschichte in Tacitus Germania* (1920). Norden was Ordinarius in Klassische Philologie at the University of Berlin, soon to be Rector of the university and in 1936 to be hailed as “the greatest Latinist in the world” by President Conant of Harvard when Norden was awarded an honorary degree at Harvard’s tercentennial. Norden wrote that many of the traits and characteristics which had been assigned over the centuries to the Germans were rather wandering motifs characteristic of ancient ethnographical writing. The general outcry in the country, in the second year after the Treaty of Versailles and before the rise of Adolf Hitler, was enormous, so that Norden, in the preface of the second edition in the following year, recanted.

As Krebs wrote in his last sentence, “In the end the Roman historian did not write a most dangerous book; his readers made it so.” Any reader of Krebs’ splendid book will learn a great deal about how this came about. We are fortunate to have it.