

The Comitatus Ethic (Review): *The Wanderer, The Seafarer, Dream of the Rood, Deor, Widsith*

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**Ancient and Medieval World Literature
ENGL 3335**

Cornelius Tacitus (56/7-115?)

- Roman historian
- Senator, consul, governor of Asian territories 112-113
- *Agricola* and *Germania* both completed in 98
 - *Agricola* was his father in law - military legate in Britain
 - *Germania* - based on Pliny the Younger and reports from Roman soldiers

The *comitatus*

- *comes* - companion
- *comitatus*- companionship/company
 - Fr. *comte, vicomte* - ModE *count, viscount*
- description of relations between a lord and his retainers (OE *þegn*, early ModE *thane*)
- in most basic form, loyalty/service in exchange for support and treasure

Dangers of using Tacitus

- Moralistic
 - emphasizes good traits of Germanic peoples to criticize Roman society
 - Exaggerates negative traits of Germanic peoples to define Roman virtue
- Not firsthand knowledge
- Describes Germania in the late first century
 - no guarantee that Germanic society/ies were exactly the same when they got to England in the fifth century
- A literary, not necessarily historical, ideal
 - There are kings, thanes, ealdormen, etc. in England, but the reality and the poetry are sometimes at odds

Why do we use Tacitus, then?

- From the Renaissance to the 18th century, “literature” meant the classics - Greek and Latin
- Study of English lit did not seriously take off until the 1700’s, and the first major OE studies are in the 1800’s - the model for study of Old English was the study of classics
- Scholars noticed that what is depicted in EMedE heroic poetry is a lot like what Tacitus describes, so he was linked to OE lit
- Remember - calling the heroic ethic the *comitatus* is a later idea - the early English might have known the ideas, but they would not have called it the *comitatus*

informal **The Exeter Book**

formal

s. x2 = 2nd half of tenth century

- Exeter, Cathedral Library (Dean and Chapter), MS 3501, s. x² (Conner - 950-970)
- Various types of poems in the MS
- We are looking at the *elegies* - poems on the passing of a person, but also for a way of life or of a nation - a classical genre term applied to the texts

- *The Wanderer, The Seafarer* – life outside the heroic ethic
- *Deor, Widsith* (“wild creature”, “wide voyage”) – two poets who have wandered among many peoples, bemoaning their fate
- *The Ruin* - possibly based on the Roman ruins of a bath near the city of Bath
- *The Husband’s Message, The Wife’s Lament, Wulf and Eadwacer* - kinship vs. the *comitatus*

The Vercelli Book

- Vercelli, Bibliotheca capitolare cxvii, second half of 10C
- southeast of England, possibly Canterbury
 - 23 homilies
 - Six religious poems (*Andreas, Fates of the Apostles, Dream of the Rood, Elene, Soul and Body I, Homiletic Fragment I*)
 - Possibly brought by an English monk on a trip to Rome, or by English pilgrims *en route* to Rome, or given to an Italian priest who had been in England - no one knows for sure how it ended up in Italy