

*The Wife's Lament, The Husband's Message, and the Call of Duty*  
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**Ancient and Medieval World Literature**  
**ENGL 3335**

**Cornelius Tacitus (56/7-115?)**

- Roman historian
- Senator, consul, governor of Rome's 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*

**The Exeter Book**

- Exeter, Cathedral Library (Dean and Chapter), MS 3501, second half 10c (950-970)
- Various types of poems in the MS
- We will be looking at some of the *elegies* - poems on the passing of a person, but also for a way of life or of a nation - a later term applied to the texts
  - *The Ruin* - possibly based on the Roman ruins of a bath near the city of Bath

- *The Wife's Lament, The Husband's Message, Wulf and Eadwacer* - kinship vs. the *comitatus*