

**Heroism and the *Comitatus* Ethic:
The Most Important Word the Early English Never Knew
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British Literature I
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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 Early Medieval English 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 Battle of Maldon

- London, BL, Cotton Otho A.xii
 - poem destroyed in Ashburnham House fire, other parts of MS heavily damaged
- Oxford, Bodleian, Rawlinson B.203
 - transcription by John Elphinston made shortly before the fire is the only surviving

record

- late tenth or early eleventh century, possibly up to 1020 or so
- Depicts battle fought in 991 between A-S forces led by Byrhtnoth and Viking invaders

Byrhtnoth and History

- *Liber Eliensis* – account of Byrhtnoth's deeds on behalf of Ely monastery and his final battle
- Byrhtferth – *Vita Sancti Oswaldi* – events of the reform, but mentions Byrhtnoth's death and his courage at the battle
- *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, A-text - Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, 173
 - In this year Anlaf came with ninety-three ships to Folkstone and raided about it, and sailed from there to Sandwich and from there so to Ipswich, overrunning all the land, and so to Maldon. Ealdorman Byrhtnoth came against them with his defense force and fought them, but they killed the ealdorman there and held the place of slaughter. Afterwards peace was made with them [i.e. by tribute] and the king took him [Anlaf] to the bishop's hand [i.e. sponsored him for confirmation] by the counsel of Archbishop Sigeric of Canterbury and Bishop Alfheah of Winchester.
- *ASC E-text* - Oxford, Bodleian Lib., Laud 636
 - In this year Ipswich was raided and soon afterwards ealdorman Byrhtnoth was killed at Maldon. In this year it was first decided that tribute be paid to the Danes because of the great fear they caused along the coast. It was at first ten thousand pounds. Archbishop Sigeric first advised that plan.
- *ASC F-text* - London, BL, Cotton Domitian A.viii
 - In this year ealdorman Byrhtnoth was killed at Maldon, and the same year it was first decided that tribute be paid to the Danes because of the evils they worked along the coast. It was at first ten thousand pounds. Archbishop Sigeric first advised that plan.

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 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*

The Vercelli Book

- Vercelli, Bibliotheca capitolare cxvii, s. x²
- 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