Anchoring the Barbarians: ethnographic topoi in Tacitus’ Batavian Revolt

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This paper considers the sustained use of ethnographic topoi in Tacitus’ narrative of the Batavian Revolt of 69 CE (Hist. 4.12-5.26) as a case study of the anchoring function of commonplaces in historiographical narrative and discourse. Although Civilis, the revolt’s leader, and his allies are Romanized elites, their actions and speeches portray the war as a rebellion against Rome and Romanization, employing commonplace ethnographic dichotomies such as nature/culture, wilderness/city, and freedom/subjugation. I argue that this systematic ethnographic discourse allows Tacitus to “have his cake and eat it, too”, as he exposes the anchors on which Civilis’ deceptive rhetoric relies while exploiting his own audience’s receptivity to them.

Aristotle had pointed out in the Rhetoric that people like to hear what they already believe presented as the truth (1395b1-3). Commonplaces thus “anchor” the
speaker’s (or the writer’s) persuasive goal in the familiar. Ethnographic commonplaces make a useful case study in this regard as they make direct factual claims about the nature of foreign peoples, while also illustrating the range and flexibility of a term like “commonplace” or “topos.” On the one hand are loci or topoi in what we might call their technical rhetorical sense, the categories used for finding arguments – or the rubrics of an ethnography: things like social organization, or, religion. Using ethnographic categories thus anchors a discourse in that genre and its conventions. On the other hand are commonplaces in the sense of truisms and type-scenes, such as proximity to civilization causing a people to lose their original warlike spirit, and specific national stereotypes, the things that “everyone” knows. In the case of Germanic peoples, these would be familiar from extended discussions from Caesar’s Bello Gallico and Tacitus’ own monograph Germania.

Historiographical narratives allow for such anchoring on two levels: the historian can use commonplaces himself, but commonplaces also appear in speeches and other persuasive (or narrative) contexts within the “story.” Any commonplace deployed within the narrative addresses its internal audience, of course, but also potentially addresses the reader, insofar as commonplace asserts general truths

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1 On topoi and loci in rhetorical theory, see Ostheeren 2009. For ethnographic topoi in light of ancient topic-theory, see Bringman 1989.
2 For the larger context of such ethnographic topoi, see e.g. Dauge 1981.
3 On the importance of these texts for reading Tacitus, see Krebs 2000, Ash 2014.
whose validity is, by definition, not limited to one set of particular circumstances.4 Yet commonplaces deployed in speeches also come under critical examination through their juxtaposition with the historian’s narrative of “facts,” next to which a truth that some speaker asserts may be shown to be flawed, incomplete, or irrelevant.5

The tension between these two functions of a commonplace comes out very well in Tacitus’ narrative of the Batavian Revolt, the “mixed civil and foreign war” instigated by the auxiliary commander Julius Civilis amid the Roman civil war of 69-70 CE.6 Tacitus puts a great emphasis on Civilis’ command of pretense and performance: the traditional question about Tacitus and his sources: are they making this revolt look more Germanic than it was? is one that Tacitus encourages us to ask of its instigator Civilis.7 Civilis stirs up a revolt partly in connivance with Flavian commanders and largely, at least per Tacitus, in revenge for personal slights and out a desire for power; but he anchors his res novae in very familiar topoi of Germanic peoples against Rome, using this rhetoric to acquire Gallic and German allies. By exposing the workings of Civilis’ discourse, Tacitus might seem to be “un-anchoring”

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4 To borrow a term from narratology, commonplaces are potential metalepses, devices that elide the boundaries between the “story” and the “narrative” (De Jong 2013). I’m grateful to Irene de Jong for suggesting this lens.

5 Commonplaces can be usefully compared with exempla in this regard. Cf. Chaplin 2000, Marincola 2010.

6 On the historical context, see Chilver and Townend 1985, 8-13, Brunt 1960 with previous bibliography. Timpe 2005 is a detailed examination of Tacitus’ emphases and omissions, as far as they can be recovered.

7 This has been explored by Ash 2014, although her conclusions are somewhat different from mine. For the standard view that Tacitus “barbarizes” the Batavians, the classic study is Walser 1951; for a more recent summary see Trazska-Richter 1991, 203-211.
these topoi, showing that Civilis’ revolt can’t be understood as the simple “barbarian rebellion” that much Flavian historiography probably portrayed. But I argue that Tacitus also takes advantage of these topoi himself. When Civilis and his allies play-act topoi of “Germanitas” they authorize those stereotypes, which then have dramatic or ideological effect within the historian’s narrative.

Tacitus presents Civilis as deliberately staging his rebellion as a national revolt while keeping his own designs hidden (Hist. 4.14.1-2):

Desciscendi certus, occultato interim altiore consilio, cetera ex eventu iudicaturus, novare res hoc modo coepit...[4.14.2] Civilis primores gentis et promptissimos vulgi specie epularum sacrum in nemus vocatos, ubi nocte ac laetitia incaluisse videt, a laude gloriaque gentis orsus...

Determined on rebellion, he kept his deeper plans hidden for a time... Calling the chiefs of his people and the readiest of the commoners into a sacred grove under the pretext of a feast, once he saw that they were enlivened by the night’s festivity, he spoke, beginning with the glories of their people.

And after a speech that itself repeats a number of standard anti-Roman topoi, Civilis swears the Batavians to his cause (4.15.1): Magno cum adsensu auditus barbaro ritu et patriis execrationibus universos adigit. (“Received with great acclamation, he had them all swear loyalty in a barbarian ritual and ancestral oaths.”) Sacred groves, feasts as locations for deliberation, in particular, barbari ritus – namely, human sacrifice – all appear in the Germania as characteristic Germanic practices, but Tacitus

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8 As seems to be apparent in the brief discussions of Josephus (BJ 7.75-88) and Dio Cassius (56.3.1, 16.1). For Tacitus’ source, usually considered to be the Elder Pliny see Chilver and Townend 1986, 19.
represents them here as a species for Civilis’ ulterior plans. Civilis is revealed to be reaching backwards to an idealized German identity with his ancestral oaths and barbaric rituals, anchoring his conflict with Rome in German stereotypes at their most un-Roman.

Later in the narrative, at the moment when Civilis has forced Roman legions to defect, but then allowed his German allies to kill them, Tacitus gives more detail about these vows (4.61.1): *Civilis barbaro voto post coepta adversus Romanos arma propexum rutilatumque crinem patrata demum caede legionum deposuit.* ("Civilis, according to a barbarian vow, finally cut his hair, which he had combed-out and reddened after beginning his hostilities against the Romans, once the slaughter of the legions was achieved.") Long, reddish-blond hair is a stereotypical Germanic trait, and the vow to wear one’s hair long until having killed an enemy is a practice that Tacitus in the *Germania* attributes to the Chatti, the ancestors of the Batavians. But Tacitus here emphasizes the effort that Civilis takes to achieve this echt-Germanic look: his *crines* are not *rutilae* but *rutilatae*, that is, dyed red. He not only lets his grow long, but combs it out, for which Tacitus employs the very marked and unusual word *propexum.*

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11 Cf. Livy 38.17.3-5, Pliny *NH* 28.191 for Gauls who dye their hair to look more frightening. The parallels are conveniently collected by Heubner 1976, 142, and discussed in some detail by Ash 2014.
At the same time, Civilis’ play-acted barbarum votum is implicated in a larger complex of questions about the barbarian – or not – nature of his rebellion. It comes at the moment when Civilis has persuaded Roman legions to surrender and swear allegiance to his Gallic allies, but has then been unable to restrain his German allies from massacring them. Tacitus reports ambiguously on Civilis’ reaction (4.60.3):

“…querente sane Civile et increpante Germanos tamquam fidem per scelus abrumperent. Simulata ea fuerint an retinere saevientis nequiverit, parum affirmatur. Direptis castris faces iniciunt, cunctosque qui proelio superfuerant incendium hausit.”

Civilis protested of course, and reproached the Germans for having broken faith by their crime. Whether this was a show or whether he was unable to restrain their savagery is uncertain. When they had sacked the camp, they tossed torches inside, and all those who had survived the battle were consumed by fire.

This is a classic Tacitean dilemma in which neither alternative is flattering. Either Civilis is only pretending to display the “Roman” values of fides or he can’t control his allies.

Civilis’ barbaric vow might seem to give weight to the first possibility by aligning Civilis with the German through shared barbarian habits. After all, Civilis considers his vow discharged by the slaughter of the legions. But the emphasis on Civilis’ initial pretense gives the situation a more complex valence: he may have been play-acting when he made that vow, but now, the boundary between his pretense and the identity he has taken on appears less clear. So in the end, the second of Tacitus’ two alternatives for Civilis’ reactions might seem best after all: Civilis,
genuinely split between “German” and “Roman” impulses, finds out that it isn’t easy
to control the consequences of using Germans – or maybe we should say, of using
German topoi.

The “anchor” that Civilis deliberately used to make his revolt seem like a
continuation of “ancestral” Germanic custom now seems to anchor him in reality in
an un-Roman anti-civilized world of barbarians who break faith, whose savagery
can’t be controlled, and who kill their victims in horrible rituals. By hinting at lurid
barbarian rites (and even encaustic human sacrifice), and by suggesting that Civilis
himself may be more “barbarian” than he intends, Tacitus underlines the extremity
of Roman disgrace at this nadir in the book: it’s bad enough that Roman legions
surrender and swear loyalty to the soi-disant Emperor of the Gauls. But it’s even
more shocking when the leaders aren’t relatively civilized Gauls or Batavian elites
with Roman citizenship, but wild barbarians from across the Rhine.

In my second example, Tacitus’ double-move of both undermining and
exploiting ethnographic topoi serves a larger point about Rome’s management of
Germanic tribes. This is the speech of the Tencteri, a tribe of “real” trans-rhenine
allied with Civilis, who try to persuade the inhabitants of Colonia Agrippinensis,
modern day Cologne, to give up their city, slaughter all the Romans inside, and
return to the pristine, unconfined, and free life of proper Germans. Like the
Batavians, the people of Cologne are liminal: Caesar had already noted that their
ancestors were “a bit more civilized” due to frequent contact with Gaul and Rome (BG 4.3.3). They have since intermarried with the veterans of the colonia; in the Germania Tacitus depicts them as guards stationed by Rome to guard the Rhine (28.5). This group manage a delicate balancing act throughout Histories IV, ultimately remaining more or less loyal to Rome (Hist. 4.28.1-2).

In attempting to persuade these half-Romanized Germans, the Tencteri give a lengthy speech of which practically every word is an ethnographic cliché familiar from Caesar’s account of the Germans and from Tacitus’ Germania.¹²

In a famous passage, Caesar characterized Germanic peoples by their minimal cultivation of land and lack of private property (BG 4.1.7): sed privati ac separati agri apud eos nihil est, neque longius anno remanere uno in loco colendi causa licet. (They have no private or distinct fields, nor are they permitted to remain in one place for longer than a year to cultivate the land.)¹³

The Tencteri’s speech stresses such an idealized Germanic relationship to landscape that is undifferentiated and freely available to all comers – or at least all strong comers (4.64.2-3):

Postulamus a vobis muros coloniae, munimenta servitii, detrahatis (etiam fera animalia, si clausa teneas, virtutis obliviscuntur), Romanos omnis in finibus vestris trucidetis … bona interfectorum in medium cedant, ne quis occulere quicquam aut segregare causam suam possit. [3] Liceat nobis vobisque utramque ripam colere, ut olim maioribus nostris: quo modo lucem diemque omnibus hominibus, ita omnis terras fortibus viris natura aperuit. Instituta cultumque patrium resumite, abruptis voluptatibus, quibus Romani plus adversus subjectos quam armis valent.

¹² Walser 1951, 117.
We ask you to tear down this colony’s walls, the bulwark of slavery (for even wild animals forget their valor if you keep them shut in); slaughter all the Romans within your borders...and let the property of those killed become communal, so that no one can hide anything or separate out his own interest. Allow us both to inhabit both banks of the river like our ancestors once did: just as nature made light and day open to all humans, so did she make every territory open for brave men. Return to your ancestral customs and way of life, putting an end to those pleasures which give the Romans more strength against their subjects than weapons do!

The Tencteri anchor their arguments in broad topoi about German identity, the sort of thing you find in Caesar and Tacitus: the untamed wilderness, the free passage of powerful people across land and rivers, the wild, undomesticated animals of Germany, and, of course, their resistance to the softening pleasures of civilization. These “anchors” come from the proto-history of Germany, as viewed by the Roman ethnographer. In the Germania, Tacitus imagines a pre-historical time when Gauls and Germans might have “migrated into and left areas of habitation that were still in common and not yet divided by the power of local kings.” (28.1).

But the historiographically informed reader will perceive some cracks in this picture of unified Germanic identity. Already in Caesar, the Ubii, who would eventually by granted colonia status in Cologne, have been made accustomed to Gallic customs (*Gallicis sunt moribus adsuefacti*), and they are hence a little more civilized than other Germans (*paulo...sunt ceteris humaniores*: 4.3.3). The Tencteri, meanwhile, are one of the bellicose German tribes who ambush Caesar, but whom he destroys for their treachery before he himself crosses the Rhin (*BG* 4.3-15). Such historically specific details about differences between groups of Germans and their
varying histories of contact with Rome related in the historiographical tradition undercut the Tencteri’s message of a simple, obvious pan-Germanic identity that can be neatly opposed to Rome.

Lest you think that the Tencteri here are just simple barbarians speaking the only language they know and believe (namely, German barbarian tropes), Tacitus shows in the sequel that their real concerns are rather different from their rhetoric. The Agrippinenses, who cautiously try to play for time and avoid committing themselves refuse all of the demands: they insist on keeping their walls, keeping the families they have made with the Roman veterans who founded the colony, and keeping their requirement that any Germans who visit do so: “during the day and unarmed, at least until, as they say, “these new, freshly-granted rights become habitual with age.” Agrippinenses in fact point out that the unified “German” identity that the Tencteri wish to them to join is a novelty, implying that their own ancestral customs lies elsewhere. Instead they offer to remit the tax on commerce – and the Tencteri accept this compromise. So it seems that for all of their rhetoric about primitive, Germanic unity untouched by the enslaving enticements of Roman civilization, what the “ferocious” trans-rhenine tribes really want is a tax break in getting precisely those pleasures.

But although Tacitus points out how artificial the clichéd construction of Germanic identity is, he also makes use of it, or rather, shows how the ambivalently-placed inhabitants of Cologne do. They take advantage of a number of typically
“Germanic” topoi to work against their new allies in the service of Rome. First, they turn over their hostages, Civilis’ daughter and sister, to the Roman general, in accordance with the ethnographic “fact” related in *Germania* 8 that noble female hostages are the most effective means to coerce “hearts and minds of these peoples.” When Civilis marches against them in revenge, he is deterred by news that the Agrippinenses have destroyed the allies he had stationed near them by exactly the means that the Tencteri denounced, namely, enclosure (4.79.2): *Sed [Civilem] tristis nuntius avertit: deletam cohortem dolo Agrippinensium, qui largis epulis vinoque sopitos Germanos, clausis foribus, igne iniecto cremavere.* (But a grim report deterred him: the cohort had been destroyed by a trick of the inhabitants of Cologne: when the Germans were sodden with generous feasting and wine, they shut the doors, threw on flames, and burned them.)

Beyond the standard topos of attacking the enemy unawares and after feasting, a predilection for food and, especially for drink is a staple of ethnography about Germans. Tacitus, moreover, suggests in the *Germania* that this trait might be the key to conquest (Ger. 8.1): *si indulseris ebrietati suggerendo quantum concupiscunt, haud minus facile vitiis quam armis vincentur.* (If you indulge their intoxication by piling up as much as they desire, they will be conquered no less easily by their vices than by weapons.) The Agrippinenses manage their wilder cousins with all of the

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14 *Germania* 8: “They fear captivity much more immoderately in the case of their women, such that one binds the hearts and minds of peoples much more effectively (efficacius obligentur animi civitatum) when one demands among their hostages noble maidens, as well (puellae quoque nobiles imperantur).”

methods the Roman historian proposed in his monograph: extending and maintaining the effeminizing enticements of trade, acquiring valuable hostages, and taking advantage of barbarian lack of self-control. Or at least, that’s the story; Tacitus only provides the report of a messenger, that is: a narrative plainly based on ethnographic assumptions about how Germans behave. There’s no reason to be skeptical that this isn’t what indeed took place in Cologne, yet it seems significant that Tacitus distances the events in this way. Fittingly, the mere narrative of stereotypically defeated barbarians has sufficient power to frighten away Civilis, that former master of manipulating topoi.

As for Tacitus, he gets to subvert his barbarians, and have them, too. On the one hand, he shows that the commonplaces of Germanic identity are just that – topoi used to construct (to anchor) an identity for quite cynical, ideological ends. And this is true not only of an ambiguous figure like Civilis or a liminal people like the Batavians or the Ubii of Colonia Agrippinensis; it’s also true of “real” Germans like the Tencteri, whose overblown talk of a return to “authentic” German unity turns out to be much less important to them than practical, and very un-German benefits like access to trade and entrance into an urban community.

At the same time, Tacitus takes advantage of those “anchors” himself. Holly Haynes identifies a pattern in the Histories, where individuals “make up and then
believe” (*fingere et credere*) ideologies, which they then treat as self-evident truth. For Haynes, the historian is always reflexively critical of the ideologies that he reveals – in our terminology, the anchors that he pulls up -- and this may be true of Tacitus’ treatment of the Roman principate, which is Haynes’ focus. When it comes to ‘*externae gentes*’, however, Tacitus reveals the process, but also treats it as a reliable basis for knowledge, now authorized by the people themselves. Germanic acts of anchoring, however self-conscious and fictional, create the Germans that the historian-ethnographer can use.

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16 Haynes 2003
18 There is a historical reality here as well: on Batavian “martial” identity as a creation of the Roman empire’s use of them as auxiliaries see Roymans 2004.


