

Germanic seeresses through Roman eyes

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RESUMO: Embora as mulheres da antigüidade greco-romana tenham inspirado estudos recentes, os estudiosos não deram tanta atenção às mulheres do mundo bárbaro. Este artigo examina um grupo específico destas mulheres — "adivinhas" germânicas que prediziam o futuro, principalmente acontecimentos militares. Escritores romanos, como César e Suetônio, descreveram essas adivinhas em ação. Tácito (*De Germania*), em particular, refere-se a uma delas, Veleda, como um paradigma das mulheres germânicas. Este artigo aceita a existência histórica das adivinhas (e adivinhos) entre os antigos germânicos; rejeita alguns relatos, mas aceita outros (como Veleda, nas *Histórias* de Tácito). O artigo conclui sugerindo a utilidade da Germanística e da Arqueologia da Idade do Ferro, para o estudo das mulheres germânicas.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Bárbaros, mulheres bárbaras, profetisas, romanos e bárbaros.

In a recent *Forschungsstand* of ancient history, Chester G. Starr (1987, p.61) wryly observed: "We [i.e., historians] have recently made the interesting discovery that a very large part of ancient humanity was female." A growing interest in women of antiquity is reflected in bibliographies by Sarah Pomeroy (1984), an anthology by Mary Lefkowitz and Maureen Fant (1982), and a new synthesis, *Women in the Classical World: Image and Text* (1994). One group, however, has not received comparable attention: women beyond the Greco-Roman world's frontiers.

The modern neglect of "barbarian" women is hardly surprising. It results largely from the loss of written primary evidence about "barbarians" in general, let alone "barbarian women". In 1892, for example, Alexander Riese (Riese 1892 & 1969) compiled textual references to the ancient Germans. His volume, comprising some 500 pages, looks comprehensive enough, until one finds that its chronology spans 600 years, from Julius Caesar to Bishop Gregory of Tours. If one excludes footnotes, translated passages, and indices, the actual contents shrink to about 400 pages, nearly all of which deal with Germanic males. Classical written sources (Bruder, 1974) tell us very little about the quotidian life of a million-or-so (Mildenberger, 1977, p.25) women in Germania Libera during the Principate. In this article, I examine a subgroup of Germanic women, seeresses (*Seherinnen, Wahrsagerinnen*, prophetesses, soothsayers) (Volkmann, 1975, pp.235-243), who practiced — or were believed to practice — divination through natural phenomena. What influence these women exerted among their own people remains problematic for current scholarship. That we can talk about them at all today results from exceptional circumstances:

states of tension between Germans and Romans. Just as barbarian males engaged the attention of Roman writers when conflicts were imminent or underway, so too did barbarian seeresses. Seeresses predicted their people's futures against Roman armies. Insofar as divination had practical consequences for barbarian leaders, its adepts became worthy topics for Roman observers.

Germanic seeresses are recorded in various media, of which the most important are two works by Tacitus: his ethnographic *Germania*¹ (published ca. A.D. 98) and Books Four and Five of his *Histories* (published between A.D. 105-108). The *Germania*, justly characterized as a "bridge between the Greco-Roman and the Germanic worlds" (Schweizer-Sidler-Schwyzler, 1923, p. v), remains the fundamental text on Germanic life during the Empire; a century of criticism has not blunted its utility (Lund, 1991, pp.1858-88, 1989-2222). It is particularly important for its topical descriptions of Germanic life, including that of women. Tacitus' remarks are a convenient starting-point for our survey.

Let us begin with Tacitus' general remarks on women in chapter 8 of the *Germania*: "The historical record shows", he says, "that [German] armies, giving ground, and even on the verge of flight, have been rallied by their women (*a feminis*)". Romans can benefit from the Germans' concern for their women by acquiring as hostages (*obsides*) "girls from noble families". Why do the Germans respect their women? Because, says Tacitus, they "believe that inherent in women is a certain holiness and prophetic ability (*sanctum aliquid et providum*)". Tacitus mentions as a recent example the seeress Veleda; earlier (*olim*) there were Albruna² and "many others." Tacitus' comments have been all the weightier because his phrase, *Veledam...vidimus*, has been understood by some to mean that he wrote as an eye-witness of Veleda's rise and fall. In consequence, his statement that *sanctum et providum* characterized Germanic women has become a commonplace;³ one modern edition even identifies as the source of "prophecy (*providum*)" the "greater internal receptivity of the female soul"⁴. Let us survey other evidence for seeresses with these comments as a frame of reference.

The earliest description of Germanic seeresses seems to be a historical fragment attributed to Posidonius (ca. 135 - 51/50 B.C.), which is preserved in Strabo's (64/3 B.C. - A.D. 21) treatise on geography (7.2.3)⁵; the fragment purports to describe the Germanic Cimbri (Much, 1915-1916, pp.42-44). When the Cimbri conduct expeditions, they are accompanied by their wives, who are attended by soothsaying priestesses (προμάντις ἰέρειαι). These gray-haired, barefoot, white-clad seeresses treat prisoners-of-war in the following manner. They lead the prisoners to a platform which surmounts a large cauldron. When each prisoner is positioned above the cauldron, a seeress cuts his throat. After examining the flow of his blood or the condition of his entrails, she makes a prophecy about an impending battle.

As it stands, the passage seems to provide trustworthy evidence for the wartime acts of Germanic seeresses. Posidonius, to whom the passage is usually credited, travelled in Transalpine Gaul, through whose southern regions the (Germanic) Cimbri had migrated several decades earlier until crushed by the consul Marius at Vercellae (101 B.C.). In another passage, Posidonius says that he had seen, in Gaul, the heads that Gallic warriors had lopped off their enemies to display as trophies⁶. Posidonius recorded such sights as an ethnographer, not as a general or politician; he bore no personal animus against the Cimbri. Because the excerpt on the Cimbri women, although gruesome, seems to be informed by disinterested curiosity, some Germanists have endorsed it as the most important source on Germanic seeresses⁷.

Recent scholarship, however, has undermined the attribution of this passage to Posidonius. In so doing, it has implicitly reassigned the passage to a later date, from the middle Republic to the early Principate. When Strabo introduces his section on the Cimbri seeresses, he does not explicitly identify Posidonius as its source; instead, he notes merely that "[They] say" (διδέχονται). Strabo's citation of anonymous sources and his use of a plural verb deviate sharply from his

usual practice of introducing Posidonian excerpts with “Ποσειδώνιος λέγει (or φήσι)”. The passage on the Cimbri seeresses, then, derives from sources other than Posidonius: it may be an anecdote that Strabo himself overheard. One of Posidonius' modern editors, I. G. Kidd, dismisses the Posidonian authorship of the passage, ascribing it to hearsay recorded by Strabo: “It is exactly the kind of anecdote which would be common currency in Rome” (Kidd, 1988, p.932). Without the authority of Posidonius behind it, the text loses credibility as an eyewitness report of Cimbri seeresses. At most, it may represent the kind of cruelty which Romans, during the early Principate, believed to be normal practice among barbarians during wartime.

A second reference to Germanic seeresses appears in Julius Caesar's commentaries on his Gallic campaigns. In 58 B.C., somewhere west of the Upper Rhine, Caesar's army faced that of the Suebic ruler Ariovistus, called “king of the Germans”. The Germans had entered Gaul as mercenaries, having been summoned to help the Celtic Aedui against their enemies. The Germans arrived, found Celtic lands attractive, and decided to stay. Their number swelled to 120,000, and more Suebi (reportedly) were about to enter Gaul. The Aedui requested help from the proconsul, Caesar. Caesar and Ariovistus negotiated in vain; when the talks collapsed, both sides prepared to fight. Ariovistus, however, seemed reluctant to send his warriors into action. After one engagement, Ariovistus withdrew before sunset. Caesar reports that he had asked some prisoners-of-war why Ariovistus would not fight a pitched battle. German seeresses, he was told, first had to predict a victory by means of lots (*sortes*) and other means of divination (*vaticinatio*). The signs turned up inauspicious for the king: Ariovistus would not win if he fought before the new moon. The following day, Caesar forced Ariovistus into battle and won decisively (Caesar, *BG* 1.50).

Some historians (Walser, 1956, p.35-36; Bruder, p.156) have questioned this passage's veracity. Earlier, Caesar had characterized the Germans as ferocious warriors; now, Ariovistus declined to fight and even seemed ready to withdraw. Ariovistus' decision, it is argued, resulted from his inferiority in numbers; the odds actually favored Caesar. So by inventing the story of Germanic seeresses, Caesar both explained Ariovistus' reluctance and dramatized his opponent's barbarism. Still, one can hardly believe that Caesar fabricated the story of the seeresses: he interrogated the prisoners before eye-witnesses — probably his staff, certainly his translators (Fix, 1984, p.555). Moreover, it is unlikely that he would knowingly exaggerate Ariovistus' “barbarism”: attentive readers would have been reminded of the awkward fact that Ariovistus had received the titles of “king” and “friend” during Caesar's consulship in 59 B.C.

If, then, Caesar is credible about the seeresses, what can we infer from his narrative? They appear to be married women, because Caesar calls them *matres familiae*. Their authority as seeresses may have rested on their high social rank: one of the casualties of the battle was a Suebic woman, one of Ariovistus' two wives. She may have been one of the *matres* (*BG* 1.53). An additional detail about the seeresses is preserved in one of Plutarch's sources: Plutarch (*Vita Caesaris* 19) says that Ariovistus' ἱέραι γυναῖκες announce the future after observing the eddies of rivers and the appearance and sounds of running water⁸.

From Caesar we may further conclude that the *matres* were not the sole practitioners of divination. After the battle, Caesar rescued the adjutant who had earlier been captured. The adjutant told Caesar that his captors (presumably males) had thrice cast lots to see whether it was auspicious to execute him. (Each time, the lots fell in his favor.) It appears, then, that men and *matres* practiced varying degrees of divination.

The third episode took place, reportedly, in northern Germany. In 9 B.C., Augustus' stepson, the consul Drusus, conducted military operations in Suebic territory. According to Suetonius, Drusus interrupted his march when the superhuman figure of a barbarian woman (*barbara mulier*) warned him *sermone latino* not to advance further (Suet., *Claudius* 1). Despite this warning, says Dio, Drusus resumed his march and reached the Elbe but was unsuccessful in

trying to cross it; he was content to erect a victory monument (Dio 55.1.1-4: vol.2; pp.479-80). Returning from the Elbe, Drusus suffered an injury and died in summer camp before he could arrive in Rome.

It would be interesting to learn if the apparition, presumably a Suebic woman, was reported in any field-dispatches that Drusus sent to Augustus. A seeress named Albruna may really have lived in the Elbe region during Drusus' campaign, and she may have been the *mulier* reported by Suetonius⁹. Alternatively, Roman public opinion (ca. 9 B.C.) may have vaguely imagined that because north-German women practiced divination, one of them must have invoked supernatural power to thwart the Roman advance. The present state of evidence does not permit one to connect a historical "Albruna" with Drusus in 9 B.C. The most reasonable explanation for the spectral warning is that it originated among informants friendly to Drusus: it furnished an honorable rationale both of Drusus' failure to advance beyond the Elbe and of his subsequent mysterious death. While the story may give us a hint about the Roman public's imagery of the far north, it contributes nothing substantial about real Germanic seeresses¹⁰.

A fourth reference to seeresses appears at the end of the Julio-Claudian dynasty. Among the vices imputed to Emperor Vitellius, Suetonius records the following. A soothsaying Chatti woman, whom Vitellius trusted as an oracle (*vaticinante Chatta muliere, cui velut oraculo adquiescebat: Vitellius* 14), had predicted that he would enjoy a long reign if he outlived his mother Sextilia. Vitellius reportedly tried to ensure his regime's longevity either by starving his mother to death or by fatally poisoning her. Sextilia died in December, A.D. 69. No evidence exists, however, to indict Vitellius of matricide. Sextilia's death can more plausibly be blamed on old age, through natural causes: in A.D. 69, she was an ailing septuagenarian.¹¹ How, then, did the story of the Chatti seeress originate?

Before he became emperor, Vitellius had briefly served as governor of lower Germany (1 Dec. 68 - 2 Jan. 69)(Ritterling, 1932, p.32; Eck, 1985, pp.132-33). Political instability reigned after Nero's suicide on 9 June 68. Vitellius, who commanded four legions, had great potential to direct the course of politics, either for himself or for others. To select and to weigh his options, he will have solicited the opinions of a range of advisors, certainly from *amici*, possibly from soothsayers.¹² Vitellius' headquarters in Colonia Claudia Ara Augusta Agrippinensium (modern Köln) gave him easy access to the Chatti homeland, which lay about 120 km away, north of present-day Frankfurt. He may even have consulted with Germans residing in Köln itself. Informants hostile to Vitellius could easily have distorted his solicitations of advice while he was still governor, conflating them with malicious rumors of his (alleged) matricide when he had become emperor. One is tempted to dismiss entirely Suetonius' comment about the soothsaying "Chatta mulier," which originated in sources that obviously denigrated Vitellius; the sources were perhaps written by Flavian partisans to justify Vespasian's *coup d'état*. No "Chatta mulier" appears in Tacitus (*Hist.* 3.67) (Bruder, 1974, p.157). The most that one can salvage from Suetonius' comment is that his contemporaries found credible the existence of seeresses among the Chatti.¹³

The fifth, and longest, description of a seeress appears in Books Four and Five of Tacitus' *Histories*. Its context is a major revolt against Roman rule, led by Julius Civilis (Krumbein, 1984, pp.7-10). Civilis belonged to a royal line of the Batavians, a Germanic people who inhabited the island (*insula Batavorum*) bounded by two branches of the Rhine as it flows into the North Sea; he had also served under Roman colors as prefect of a Batavian cohort. In A.D. 69, under the guise of loyalty to Vespasian, who had been proclaimed emperor in Alexandria, Civilis attacked Roman garrisons in Batavian territory and the Rhineland. Civilis, with an army of eight Batavian cohorts, augmented by Germans from the lower Rhine, routed the undermanned Roman garrisons between the River Main and the North Sea. He sent a captive, the legionary commander Munius Lupercus, as a gift to Veleda, "virgin of the Bructeri tribe" (*virgo nationis Bructerae: Hist.* 4.61).¹⁴ According to Tacitus, Veleda could exercise broad authority (*late imperitabat*) because Germans

believed that women like her had prophetic powers; as their superstition grew, the Germans even came to regard such women as divine (*auguscente superstitione arbitrantur deas*). Veleda's authority flourished during Civilis' rebellion because she was credited with predicting his victories over Roman legionaries; her people, the Bructeri, united with Civilis.¹⁵

Some anomalies about Veleda, however, stirred doubts in Tacitus about the actual extent and depth of her apparent preeminence. In question was her relationship with Civilis. Civilis, after initial successes, saw dissent spread among his followers. The Ubii, whose tribal *Hauptort* (modern Köln) was also a Roman administrative center, requested that Civilis and Veleda arbitrate the Ubii's disputes with some other Germans (*Hist.* 4.65). Tribal emissaries, however, were not permitted to approach Veleda directly. Instead, access to the high tower¹⁶ in which she lived was tightly restricted “in order to inspire the Germans with even more respect (*quo venerationis plus inesset*)”. Messages and responses were delivered by one of her relatives, as if he were the messenger of a divinity (*ut internuntius numinis*). Who isolated Veleda in this way, and who selected her messenger? Tacitus does not identify the agent, but he implies that it was Civilis himself.¹⁷

Other Romans seem to have concluded that Civilis was indeed manipulating Veleda for his own political purposes. After Vespasian secured himself as the new emperor, he dispatched general Quintus Petilius Cerialis to the Rhineland. Cerialis' plan seems to have been to sever the alliance between Civilis and Veleda. After some initial setbacks — including the loss of a commander, Munius Lupercus¹⁸ — Cerialis was successful in fanning discord among the Germans (*Hist.* 5.24). He secretly advised Veleda and her relatives to change the war's course (*monebat fortunam belli...mutare*) because the union with Civilis was bringing disaster to everyone. Meanwhile, Civilis' own people, the Batavians, were reported to have declared that they would more honorably submit to Roman rulers than to German women (*honestius principes Romanorum quam Germanorum feminas tolerati: Hist.* 5.25). Unfortunately, the manuscripts of the *Historiae* break off at the point where Tacitus is describing negotiations; the story of Civilis and of Veleda has been lost.

Tantalizing traces of Veleda, however, have survived in non-narrative sources. In one of his poems, Statius alludes to the feats of Quintus Rutilius Gallicus; he is described as having witnessed entreaties of the captive Veleda (*captivaeque preces Veledae: Silvae* 1.4.90). This brief phrase about Rutilius is complemented by a military diploma found in Rome. It mentions units “which are in Germany [serving] under Q. Iulius Rutilius Gallicus” as of 15 April 78 (Dessau, *ILS* 9052). Rutilius would have been the governor of lower Germany (Eck, 1985, pp.144-45) at that time, so Veleda's capture must have taken place between A.D. 70 and 78 (Ritterling, 1932, p.58, n.17; Will, 1987, p.43). What happened to Veleda after she was captured? In 1926, during excavations of a temple at Ardea, 30 km south of Rome, a small marble inscription, written in Greek and bearing Veleda's name, was discovered (Guarducci, 1949-51, pp.75-87; Des Places, 1948, pp. 381-90; Mingazzini, 1951, pp. 71-76; Stefani, 1954, pp.29-30; Walser, 1955, cols.617-621). Reinhold Merkelbach's (1981, p.241) restoration of the text reveals it to be an inquiry by a petitioner whose name ends with - σιωνῶ; it may be Vespasian himself.¹⁹ The petitioner asks what is to be done with the tall virgin (μακρὰ παρθένος) Veleda, whom the “Rhine-drinkers (Ῥηνοπόται)” venerate (σέβουσιν). The phrase, “Rhine-drinkers” may refer to Veleda's people, the Bructeri, who lived north of the Lippe River and whose homeland adjoined the Rhine; it may also refer, by synecdoche, to all Germans. The last line of this fragmentary inscription includes a verb in the imperative mood, “let [her] wipe (ἀπομυσσέτω)” and an adjective, “bronze (χαλκοῦν),” whose noun has unfortunately been lost. These *lacunae* admit two divergent conclusions about Veleda.²⁰ If the missing direct-object is a noun like λύχνος, “temple lamp”, then Veleda may have continued her soothsaying, this time through another medium: lychnomancy, divining the future from lamp-smoke (Ganszyniec, 1927, cols.2115-2119).²¹ If, on the other hand, a mundane direct-object (like

floors) appeared in the original text, then Veleda may have become little more than a temple cleaning-woman. In the latter alternative, the inscription would be a *Spottepigramm*, a satiric jibe at a woman whom Germans once revered as a goddess (Keil 1947, pp.185-90; Wilhelm, 1948, pp.151-54). The discovery of more fragments or of complete inscriptions may yet clarify Veleda's fate in Italy.

A sixth reference to a Germanic seeress turns up in an excerpt from Dio Cassius' *History* (67.5.3: Dio-Exc., vol. 3, p.180). Sometime in the early 90s, Emperor Domitian received German visitors in Rome: Masyos,²² king of the Semnones, and a virgin seeress (παρθένος...θειάζουσα) named Ganna (Reichert, 1987, p.307), whom Dio (or his excerptor) identifies as a successor of Veleda. The occasion for this visit is unrecorded; Dio-Excerptor simply notes that the king and the seeress came to Rome, received honors from Domitian (τιμῆς παρ' αὐτοῦ τυχηρόντες) and returned home. This episode defies easy explanation because of the unsatisfactory state of its two literary sources. Suetonius omits the episode in his biography of Domitian. The surviving Dio-manuscripts that cover Domitian's reign are lacunose; one can only guess where the visit fitted in Dio's original narrative. Finally, no other sources corroborate the visit.²³

Assuming, however, that a state visit did take place, how can we explain it? One possible explanation is that Domitian, who was reputed to be very superstitious, summoned his visitors in the hope that they could nullify unfavorable omens through auspicious ones. Suetonius records that "Chaldaeans" had predicted the course of Domitian's life (and presumably, death) from his childhood onward (*Domitian* 14.3). Moreover, Domitian reportedly feared the death predicted for him by "Ascletrio mathematicus" (*Domitian* 15.8). In this interpretation, Domitian's fright moved him to summon a seeress: "Domitians krankhafter Aberglaube steht im Zentrum" (Bruder, 1974, p.158). Another possible explanation would look beyond Domitian's personality, preferring as a cause his reaffirmation of gender roles. According to Suetonius, Domitian attended closely to public morality, sternly punishing offenses at which Vespasian and Titus might simply have winked. Domitian condemned three Vestal Virgins (A.D. 83) and the Chief-Vestal (A.D. 90) to be executed for lapsing in their vows of chastity (*Domitian* 8.5). By publicly honoring a barbarian *virgo*, Domitian may have intended to contrast her with the shameful conduct of Roman Vestals. In this interpretation, Domitian plays off a barbarian woman against the Vestals, thereby reaffirming a conservative Roman standard of morality.

A far more compelling explanation of the visit, however, can be offered: it has the merit both of explaining why Ganna *and* Masyos came to Rome and of accommodating the visit with traditional diplomacy. Still fresh in Domitian's memory was the revolt of Civilis, in which the seeress Veleda had played a strong supporting role. Earlier in his reign (A.D. 83-85), Domitian had fought a war against the Chatti; the latter years of his reign were disturbed by the Dacians and Sarmatians. The visit of Masyos, a king, and Ganna, a seeress, was probably linked with Roman responses to chronic disturbances in *barbaricum*. Domitian either initiated or renewed friendship with the Semnones, a Suebic people, to keep them as allies against the Chatti (Will, 1987, p.43; Jones, 1992, pp.151-52) and other northern barbarians.²⁴ Such interventions among the Free Germans were consistent with the Flavians' policy of restoring Rome's frontiers, shattered after the fall of Nero, the revolt of Civilis, and the recent civil wars.

Suetonius elsewhere reveals useful information on German soothsaying. He reports that during the last year of his reign, Domitian was troubled by sinister omens (*Domitian* 16.3). He therefore sought the aid of a soothsayer (*haruspex*) from Germany. The soothsayer was executed after he shared with Domitian an unwelcome meaning of the omens: a change of regime was imminent. This victim, however, was *not* Ganna: if it had been, Suetonius would have called her a *haruspica*. Ganna's mantic leadership over the Semnones did not preclude the coexistence of influential soothsayers in other tribes.

Our brief roster of Germanic seeresses closes with a seventh name that came to light,

surprisingly, on Elephantine Island, opposite Syene (modern Aswan), in the Upper Nile.²⁵ In 1917, Wilhelm Schubart published an *ostrakon*, a potsherd fragment of the type often reused as receipts in Roman Egypt (Schubart, 1917. cols.328-333). The inscription comprises ten rows of personal names and titles; a broad line divides lines 6 and 7. Above the line are administrative and military titles like ἑπαρχος, the Greek equivalent of *praefectus*, referring to either the governor (*Praefectus Aegypti*) or a legionary prefect (*Praefectus legionis*); κορνουκλαρι - for Latin *cornicularii*, “adjutants”, and so on. Beneath the dividing-line are personal names and civilian occupations like a κναφεύς (a misspelling of γναφεύς, “cloth fuller”. On line 8 appears Βαλουβουργ Σήνονι [sic!] σιβύλλαι, “Walburg, sibyl of the Semnones”.²⁶ Walburg thus resembles the Ganna who visited Domitian in Rome: she is associated with the north-German Semnones and is identified as a seeress. Why was she on Elephantine Island? The possibility that springs to mind is that Walburg accompanied German warriors in Roman service. No evidence exists, however, to show that Elephantine or the nearby camp at Syene ever housed a garrison of German regular or supernumerary troops during the first and second centuries.²⁷ She is unlikely to have served in any temple on Elephantine.²⁸ Walburg, therefore, is more likely to have been victim of some Roman-German conflict of the first or second century,²⁹ assigned to serve an unknown master on Elephantine, perhaps as a seeress-in-residence.³⁰ Was she a prisoner-of-war (*captiva*), who had permanently lost her liberty? Or was she a hostage (*obses*; cf. *Germania* 8) who would eventually be restored to her own people? Her status remains to be clarified through the recovery of papyri or more inscriptions.³¹

We should now consider how compatible the historical seeresses are with the seeresses depicted in *Germania*. By our revised chronology, Caesar's account of the *mulieres familiae* becomes the earliest source for the existence among right-Rhine Germans of seeresses. From Caesar we learn that males, too, practiced divination through lots and auspices; this is confirmed by Suetonius' reference to a *haruspex* during the reign of Domitian. Even Tacitus explicitly states that men and women practice divination: *Auspicia sortesque. . . observant* (*Germania* 10). Still, during the early principate, it is women of the Chatti and the Suebi who come to the foreground of public attention as diviners. We have no way to substantiate the historicity of these women although the name “Albruna”, if genuine, may have belonged to one of them.

By far the best-known Germanic seeress is Veleda, whose place in history is secured by her appearances in two Tacitean works. Further, as already mentioned, Veleda's existence is confirmed because Tacitus seemingly wrote as an eye-witness of her career — *Veledam... vidimus*. Whether Tacitus personally beheld Veleda is an unresolved question. Since a writer may refer to him - or herself in the plural, the verb *vidimus* could mean, “I, Cornelius Tacitus, have seen”, but it may also mean, more diffusely: “We [Romans] have experienced”.³² A more serious problem is that the real Veleda is obscured because of inconcinnity between her description in the *Germania* and in the *Histories*. In the former work, Tacitus respectfully describes Veleda as “revered for a long time by many Germans as a divine being” (*diu apud plerosque [sc. Germanos] numinis loco habitam: Germania* 8). Tacitus implies that the reverence shown to Veleda was sincere; it was inspired neither by empty flattery nor by improper deification. By contrast, in his *Histories*, Tacitus strongly suggests that Veleda was not so much a pan-Germanic quasi-divinity as she was a tribal (Bructeri) seeress whose pre-eminence was nurtured by a shrewd rebel for his own political advantage. A consensus³³ presently favors the view that when Tacitus idealizes Veleda and *Germania* women in *Germania* 9, he wishes more to rebuke the senate's deification of unworthy Julio-Claudian women³⁴ than to describe a real Germanic seeress. The real Veleda will more likely be found in the *Histories* than in the *Germania*.

A memory of real Germanic seeresses has survived till now, but with a loss of integrity. That they existed and foretold the future seems certain; but other essential information about them has been deformed by transmission through cultural filters of the Mediterranean world.

One challenge for students of Germanic women is to analyze the nature of these cultural assumptions. Much valuable work, which lies within the province of traditional *Quellenkritik*, already fills commentaries on Tacitus; one can go further, however, by asking what classical writers mean when they describe Germanic seeresses as *virgo* and *parthenos*. By using these terms, do they mean to say that the seeresses were virgins, dedicated to perpetual chastity, and thus separated from their normal social roles as wives and mothers? Or do classical writers subordinate a fluid Germanic reality — seeresses as either “virgins” or “young, yet unwed women” — to the formal status of the Roman Vestal Virgins?³⁵

Quellenkritik can show how Greco-Roman cultural assumptions modified raw information; formal theory can suggest means by which gender roles are shaped. Neither, however, can replace empirical evidence for real Germanic women. Two large, and largely unexplored, fields which can yield such evidence are Germanistics and Iron-Age Archaeology. Germanists have long been compiling and editing rune-inscriptions; the inscriptions were produced by indigenous writers to be read by their indigenous contemporaries. As such, they operate independently of their Roman contemporaries (Bruder, 1974, p.vii). To be sure, the runes are difficult to use with confidence: their dating is imprecise — estimates range from the early third century A.D. (Page, 1987, p.23) to the 6th-7th centuries (Bruder, 1974, p.5) — and it is uncertain how far into the past one may retroject data from the rune-producing societies. Still, the runes will repay study. One interesting result, for example, of the “magical runes” is that they show women as objects rather than subjects of magic (Bruder, 1974, p.54). If this conclusion is correct, can it be explained by assuming that to the rune-carvers divination was one thing, magic another? Or does it mean that between the 1st century A.D. and late antiquity Germanic males succeeded in appropriating for themselves magical (and mantic?) powers?³⁶

By unearthing settlements and graves, Iron-Age archaeologists can trace the growth of social differentiation and political centralization among the Germans. Archaeology, indeed, has laid bare some ancient Germans themselves, thanks to the German custom of inhumation and to the preservative properties of acid.³⁷ Some of the evidence converges with descriptions in Tacitus' *Germania*: the “Suebian” hair-knot worn by the Osterby bog-man (Glob, 1988, p.117)(cf. *Germania* 38); the partly-shaven head of the Windeby bog-woman (Glob, 1988, pp.112-14, 153) (cf. *Germania* 19).³⁸ Some of the evidence, however, is novel. In 1922, for example, a moor in Spelle (Lower Saxony) yielded sixteen inhumed bodies; death resulted from battle-wounds. Two of the victims were women, approximately eighteen and twenty years old. They were clad in buckskin jackets and long trousers. Their grave-goods included a sword, spear, (hacked) shield, bow-and-arrows, and a quiver. The date of burial is estimated to have been sometime between Caesar and Augustus (Dieck, 1975, p.93). Classical sources say not a word about the existence of Germanic women-warriors. Were these women regular warriors, killed in an intertribal conflict, or were they victims of some private dispute? Did women-warriors like these coexist with seeresses and soothsayers? Merely to raise such questions is to confess the rudimentary state of our present knowledge. It is reasonable to expect, however, that eventually our understanding of Germanic seeresses will grow, in direct proportion to what we learn about Germanic women generally, and about the whole societies of which both groups were integral members.

Notes

1 - I have used the following texts and commentaries: *Tacitus' Germania*, edited by Heinrich Schweizer-Sidler and Eduard Schwyzer [hereafter, Schweizer-Sidler-Schwyzer], 8th ed. (Halle a.d.S.: Waisenhaus, 1923) and *Die Germania des Tacitus*, edited by Rudolf Much and Richard

- Kienast [hereafter, Much-Kienast], 2nd ed. (Heidelberg: C. Winter, 1959).
- 2 - "Albruna" is preferable to "Aurinia", a variant found in some manuscripts (Reichert, 1987, p.34). Schweizer-Sidler-Schwyzler, p. 24, following W. Wackernagel, analyze the name as "one gifted with the divine, magical powers (*runa*) of the Elbe (*alb*; cf. English "elf"). Much-Kienast add two onomastic glosses: "she who is familiar with secret knowledge of the Elbe spirits", and "the trusted familiar of Elbe beings". Schweizer-Sidler-Schwyzler, p. 24, set her *floruit* "wohl in der Zeit der Kriege des Drusus und Tiberius". Much-Kienast say that *olim* admits an early date, contemporary with the campaigns of Drusus (12-9 B.C.) rather than Germanicus (between A.D. 11-16). "Albruna", like "Veleda", may be a *Beiname* rather than a personal name (Much-Kienast, 1959, pp.118-119; Bruder, 1974, p. 153).
 - 3 - "Wohl kaum ein Wort aus der taciteischen Germania ist so oft zitiert und benützt worden" as this phrase (Bruder, 1974, p.152). One of its early enthusiasts was Jacob Grimm (Bruder, 1974, p.v-vi).
 - 4 - "In der größeren inneren Empfänglichkeit der weiblichen Seele" (Much-Kienast, p.117).
 - 5 - The passage is reproduced by Felix Jacoby (ed.), *Fragmenta der Griechischen Historiker*, vol. IIA [No. 87: "Poseidonius von Apameia", F31(3)] (Berlin: Weidmann, 1926), pp.241-242.
 - 6 - The testimony to Posidonius' travel in Gaul is reproduced *apud* Strabo (*Geographica* 4.4-5): "Φησὶ γοῦν Ποσειδώνιος αὐτὸς ἰδεῖν ταύτην [sc. τὴν θεάν, "spectacle"; i.e., of head-trophies]. The passage is printed in *Posidonius, I. The Fragments*, edited by L. Edelstein and I. G. Kidd (Cambridge: University Press, 1972), p.7; the commentary appears in *Posidonius, II. The Commentary* (i), edited by I. G. Kidd (Cambridge: University Press, 1988), pp.17-18, who says that Posidonius could have seen the head-trophies near Massilia (Gallia Narbonensis).
 - 7 - E.g., Bruder, 1974, p.158; he cites a German translation of the passage (Norden, 1959, p.123). Bruder misleadingly ascribes the same passage to "Strabo, Geogr. 294, 4", without elaboration on p.152. Margherita Guarducci (1945-46, p.168) also assumes that Posidonius wrote this passage and that he accurately describes Cimbri seeresses. See also L. Schmidt and H. Zeiss (1938-1940 & 1970, p.20).
 - 8 - In his discussion of prophecies (*Stromata* 1.72.3: 1951, p.102), Clement of Alexandria (c. 150-c.216) closely paraphrases this passage from Plutarch. Dio Cassius (38.48.1: 1898 & 1955, v.1, p.464) refers to the women as γυναικες...θειάσσααι: he mentions the prediction to Ariovistus but says nothing about techniques of divination.
 - 9 - Much-Kienast, p.119, say about the *barbara mulier, humana maior* (Suet. *Claudius* 1-2): "Das könnte Albruna gewesen sein".
 - 10 - Bruder (1974, pp.156-57) concludes that "für eine germanische Altertumskunde überhaupt, sind derartige Zeugnisse vollkommen wertlos".
 - 11 - Max Fluss, "Sextilia, 32", in *RE* II A, 2 (1923), col. 2328, based on Suet. *Vitellius* 3.1 and 18. Suetonius (*Vitellius* 14) says only that Vitellius was rumored (*suspectus est*) to have committed matricide and that there were several versions (*Alii tradunt*) of Sextilia's (allegedly) unnatural demise.
 - 12 - Consultation of oracles by other emperors: Suetonius, *Nero* 36; *Galba* 9; *Otho* 4; *Vespasian* 6-7.
 - 13 - Thus, von Petrikovits: "Daß man glaubte, chattische Frauen besäßen die Fähigkeit zum Wahrsage, ergibt sich aus Suet. Vitell. 14" (Petrikovits, 1981, p.384).
 - 14 - *Veleda* may be a title ("Die Seherin") rather than a personal name: Schweizer-Sidler-Schwyzler (commentary on *Germ.* 7), p.24. A variant form of the name was inscribed on an amphora

(2nd-3rd century) discovered in Xanten in lower Germany: *Belada Fria[tta?]*(Bakker & Galsterer-Kröll, 1975, p.159). Hermann Reichert believes that "Belada" is etymnologically identical to "Velaeda" (Reichert, 1987, p.132).

- 15 - Schmidt-Zeiss, pp.371-72, *et passim*. A major question about the Bructeri is their political structure during Veleda's *floruit*. In A.D. 97, T. Vestricius Spurinna was honored by the senate for conquering the Bructeri and placing a *Bructerum regem* over them (Pliny, *Epistulae* 2.7). Was the institution of kingship alien and new in A.D. 97? Or did the Bructeri already have a king between A.D. 68-78? What part — if any — did he play during Veleda's charismatic leadership?
- 16 - "Ipsa edita in turre" (*Hist.* 4.65). Rafael von Uslar suggests that the "tower" may have been a granary-dwelling, similar to the Balearic *talayot* and Sardinian *nuraghe* (Uslar, 1950, pp.13-16). Some support for this hypothesis can be found in the runic ownership-tags which show that women enjoyed *Schlüsselgewalt* as mistresses of the *Vorratskammer* (*Speicher*) where the household's provisions were stored (Bruder, pp.7-9, 54).
- 17 - E. A. Thompson, for example, calls attention to Tac. *Hist.* 4.65 *fin.* as showing "the deliberate attempt of Civilis to build up Veleda's influence so that she might have more power over his German followers" (Thompson, 1965, p.38, n.3).
- 18 - Munius Lupercus was a captive who was sent, among other gifts (*inter dona: Hist.* 4.61.3) — including the Roman flagship — by Civilis to Veleda. What would have happened to him in German hands can only be surmised, because he died before reaching Veleda. Gerold Walser (1951, p.115) is skeptical about even his (alleged) capture; he suggests that like another unsuccessful commander, C. Dillius Vocula (*Hist.* 5.49), Lupercus was killed by his own men.
- 19 - The petitioner may also be Titus, whose official name was "T. Flavius Vespasianus" (Guarducci, 1949-51, p.80-81; Stefani, 1954, p.30). If it was Titus, then the inscription can be assigned to his brief reign, A.D. 79-81.
- 20 - "I still do not know", says Arnaldo Momigliano, "what to do with the inscription of Veleda published by M. Guarducci" (Momigliano, 1987, p.125).
- 21 - Guarducci inclines to the view that Veleda, because of the respect Romans accorded to her virginity, was permitted to continue soothsaying in a sanctuary (Guarducci, 1945-46, p.170).
- 22 - Dio-Exc. has Mavsuo", ο* Semnovnwn basileuv". His name is inconsistently transliterated: Masyas, Massyas, Masua (Reichert, 1987, p.495).
- 23 - Lund believes that Tacitus could have learned about the cult of the Semnones (*Germania* 39) during this visit (Lund, 1991, p.413). If Tacitus recorded the visit, it has been lost, along with much of the *Histories*.
- 24 - Karl Strobel believes that Masyos and Ganna were allies in Domitian's successful policy of employing Semnones to isolate the Marcomanni and Quadi (Strobel, 1989, pp.99-100). Schmidt-Zeiss (p. 224), give a different interpretation of the visit: The background to the *Gesandtschaft* was Semnonic complicity with Danubian Germans and Sarmatians against the Romans. To Schmidt-Zeiss, then, the initiative for the visit came from Semnones who were presumably suing for peace. This conclusion, however, violates the plain sense of the Dio-passage, which clearly states that Domitian bestowed an honor (τιμή) upon the Germans, an act more appropriate for allies than for supplicants. Compare τιμῆς τυχεῖν (Sophocles, *Electra* 364), which David Grene renders "to win. . . honor:" *Sophocles II* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), p.139.
- 25 - Until Trajan conquered territory down to the Red Sea, Elephantine and Syene marked the southern limits of the Roman Empire; Tacitus, writing ca. 117, calls these sites *claustra olim Romani imperii* (*Annals* 2.61).

- 26 - Schubart (1917, col.330) argues persuasively that the ethnicon on line 8, "Senoni" (Celtic), is a scribal error for "Semnoni" (Germanic). This view is endorsed by E. Schroeder: "Der Fehler *Senones* für *Semnones* begegnet übrigens auch bei Velleius 2, 106, 2 und in jüngeren Hss. der *Germania* c. 39" (Schroeder, 1918, p.198, n.2). Schroeder associates the root *Walu-* ("staff", "magician's wand") with words like "Walpurgis", and "Walkürie". He further makes the point (following a suggestion by Richard Reitzenstein) that Σήνωνι should be read as an attributive-adjective modifying σιβύλλαι : the resulting phrase should be read as "Walburg, the Semnonic sibyl", rather than "Walburg, a member of the Semnones, a sibyl". (In this reading, "Semnones" is understood as a cult-name, not an ethnicon.) Théodore Reinach follows Schubart's and Schroeder's emendation (Reinach, 1920, pp.104-106). The Germanist Karl Helm proposes that the original form of the name was "Waluburg", and that it is a *Beiname* rather than a personal name (Helm, 1918, p.340). Reichert (p. 115) lists her name as "Baluburg", without elaboration.
- 27 - Three cohorts at Syene (Lesquier, 1918, p.411 & 473; Zucker, 1939, p.5). Germanic units of the Roman army are abundantly recorded in Egypt during the fourth and fifth centuries (Glau & Helm, 1910, pp.3-5). The legal historian Leopold Wenger suggests that Walburg might have lived in Egypt after the second century (Wenger, 1922, p.15, n.24). Wenger's suggestion for a post-200 A.D. date, however, is unfounded: the ethnicon (or cult-name) "Semnones" did not survive the end of the 2nd century A.D. It is last attested ca. A.D. 179/80 (Dio 71.20; vol.3, pp.274-75).
- 28 - Walter Otto says that "Aus römischer Zeit ist mir allerdings kein Beispiel für eine Frau in höherer priesterlicher Stellung bekannt geworden" (Otto, 1905, p.93).
- 29 - Following Schubart (1917, p.328), commentators have dated the *ostrakon* to the second century A.D. Schubart's estimate, based on stylistic criteria, is not certain. Professor Roger Bagnall (Columbia University) has kindly examined a photocopy of the *ostrakon* and concludes that it may be dated to the first century A.D.
- 30 - Schubart (1917, p.332) ventures that "eine deutsche Wahrsagerin [mag] als schätzbare Bereicherung der Dienerschaft gegolten haben". Heinz Kortenbeutel speculates that Walburg belonged to "das Gesinde oder Gefolge eines römischen Statthalters" (Kortenbeutel, 1939, pp.179-80).
- 31 - In the meantime, Walburg has dropped through the interstices between Classical Religion, Egyptology, and Germanistics: she is absent from relevant surveys (Rzach, 1923; Parke, 1988). At best, she is mentioned *en passant* (Schmidt-Zeiss, p.287; Bruder, p.158, n.12). Is it only accidental that Walburg, whose predecessors divined the future from the swirls and sounds of water, was assigned to Elephantine Island, within earshot of the First Cataracts of the Nile?
- 32 - For the broad sense of the verb: "*vidimus* kann auch besagen, 'wir haben erlebt'" (Schweizer-Sidler-Schwyzler, p. 188); "*vidimus* heißt nun 'wir (Römer) haben es erlebt'" (Much-Kienast, p. 24).
- 33 - Lund characterizes the Tacitus of *Germania* as a "soft primitivist", the Tacitus of the *Historiae* as a "hard primitivist" (Lund, 1991, p.,1892). Similar views are expressed by Bruder (1974, pp.149-50) and Ronald Syme (Syme, 1958, v.1, p.174).
- 34 - E.g., Julia Drusilla, Caligula's sister (Suet. *Gaius* 24; Dessau, *ILS* 196: [Div]ae Drusillae); Poppaea Sabina, Nero's wife (Tac. *Annals* 16.21.2); Claudia, Nero's infant daughter (Tac. *Annals* 15.23).
- 35 - Even the Vestal Virgins could be understood in different ways by Romans themselves (Beard, 1980, pp.12-17). The ambiguity of terms for sexual status is well-known from Biblical studies: Hebrew *almah*, "unmarried woman" (Isaiah 7:14) becomes *parthenos* (Septuagint), *virgo*

(Vulgate), and “virgin” (Authorized Version).

- 36 - A huge literature in the field of *Siedlungsarchäologie* is being produced by specialists like Herbert Jankuhn.
- 37 - “No idealized portrait in marble, but the veritable man himself, preserved for some fifteen centuries — preserved, or rather pickled, in the peat of the moor” (Hodgkin, 1935, v.1, p.2).
- 38 - Lund says that the *Germania* passage is so vivid that its original source must have been an eye-witness (Lund, 1991, p.1953).

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ABSTRACT: Although the women of Greco-Roman antiquity have inspired scholarship, scholars have not paid as much attention to women of the barbarian world. This paper examines a special group of such women—Germanic "seeresses" who predicted the course of future, chiefly military, events. Roman writers like Caesar and Suetonius described the seeresses in action. Tacitus (*De Germania*), in particular, referred to one of them, Veleda, as a paradigm of German women. This paper accepts the historical existence of seeresses (and male seers) among the ancient Germans; it rejects some Roman accounts but accepts others (like Veleda in Tacitus' *Histories*). The paper concludes by suggesting the utility of Germanistics and Iron-Age Archaeology for the study of German women.

KEY-WORDS: Barbarians, barbarian women, sibyls, Romans and Barbarians.
