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Fecundity and Ferocity of the European Peoples: The Reception of Two Classical *topoi* in the *Res Germanicae* (1531) of Beatus Rhenanus

Introduction

The classicist and humanist Beatus Bild, better known as Beatus Rhenanus, was born in Sélestat in 1485 and died in Strasbourg in 1547. His career was mostly based in these two cities, as well as Paris and Basel, and during his lifetime he crossed paths and befriended an impressive number of humanists and men of letters, among them Desiderius Erasmus, Lefèvre d'Étaples, Sebastian Brant, and Johannes Frobenius. He became a celebrated editor of classical texts, working in close collaboration with scholars and printers on the texts of Velleius Paterculus, Tertullian, Pliny, Livy, and Tacitus. Though a classical scholar by both persuasion and training, Beatus' interest in the 'Germanic' antiquities grew steadily since *c*. 1515, and it culminated in his *Rerum Germanicarum libri tres* in 1531 (Basel) and his edition and commentary of Tacitus' *Germania* in 1533 (Basel).[1] Both works responded in their time to the first

[1] See e.g. Walter Allen Jr., "Beatus Rhenanus, Editor of Tacitus and Livy". *Speculum* 12, 1937, 383–385; James S. Hirstein, "Beatus Rhenanus et Tacite: son *Trésor du style tacitéen* (1533) et les termes *sonor* (*An.* 1,65,1) et *genticus* (*An.* 3,43,2)". *Ktèma* 24, 1999, 347–365, and *id.* "L'oeuvre philologique de Beatus Rhenanus et le devenir de la 'philologie humaniste'". *Beatus Rhenanus (1485-1547), lecteur et éditeur des textes anciens. Actes du colloque international tenu à Strasbourg et à Sélestat du 13 au 15 novembre 1998*. Edited by James S. Hirstein. Brepols, Turnhout 2001, 1–20; Ulrich Muhlack, "Beatus Rhenanus und der Tacitismus". *Beatus Rhenanus (1485-1547), lecteur et éditeur des textes anciens. Actes du colloque international tenu à Strasbourg et à Sélestat du 13 au 15 novembre 1998*. Edited by James S. Hirstein. Brepols, Turnhout 2001, 457–470, 464f. Also see John F. D'Amico, *Theory and Practice in Renaissance Textual Criticism. Beatus Rhenanus between Conjecture and History*. University of California Press, Berkeley 1988, 180 on the growth of Beatus' interest in the 'Germanic' past.

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stirrings of increased interest, among learned European audiences, towards the non-classical European histories.[2]

Rhenanus' scholarly rigour in his textual criticism and his sober desire to interpret Tacitus' *Germania* – a work only rediscovered some 80 years previously in Hersfeld, and producing a nearly immediate impact – as well as other ancient references in the light of their original context instead of anachronistic comparisons are commonly recognized.[3] This article will look in detail at Rhenanus' way of engaging with some of the elements in Tacitus' *Germania* that had by his time become fairly widespread topoi about his contemporary Germans. The case presented by his handling of the two themes of *fecunditas* ('fertility, fecundity') and *ferocitas* or *ferocia* ('fierceness, ferocity') – two age-old characteristics of northerners in the classical tradition – seems to point to his subtle manipulation (or at least sampling) of the available ancient testimonies. The use of these themes was largely informed by Rhenanus' own vast reading in classics, though some had by his time become so well-known and seldom questioned that they could be considered commonsense perceptions of his day, at least among the educated. I will first take a look at the ways in which the ancient sources handled the themes of fertility and ferocity in their image of northern groups, after which I review Rhenanus' reception of these terms. Finally, I will suggest a few reasons for his rationale in choosing not to foreground the theme of *fecunditas*, in particular. These, to my knowledge, have not been previously spotted in scholarship into Beatus Rhenanus – not even in the in-depth and nuanced studies of James Hirstein, or indeed the early review of Rhenanus' reception of Tacitus by Peter Schäffer.[4]

When an Early Modern writer makes selective use of an ancient author whom they knew very well, any consistently detected inclusions and exclusions of themes, words or motifs may allow conclusions to be drawn about the receiving writer's agendas. There is absolutely no reason to suppose Rhenanus would have remained

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2 One manifestation of this broader trend was Conrad Celtis' interest in the 'Germanic druids': Frank L. Borchardt, *German Antiquity in Renaissance myth*. Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore 1971, 106ff.; Ronald Hutton, *Blood and mistletoe: the history of the druids in Britain*. Yale University Press, New Haven and London 2009, 50f., 70; on Celtis' disposition as to Germanic ancient history in general, Kenneth C. Schellhase, *Tacitus in Renaissance Political Thought*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London 1976, 34–9; D'Amico 1988, 175f. In its own, nefarious way, the same sort of demand already fuelled the fabrications of Annio da Viterbo, among whose earliest German debunkers Rhenanus was (James S. Hirstein *Tacitus'* Germania *and Beatus Rhenanus (1485-1547)*. Peter Lang, Frankfurt-am-Main 1995, 183; Cf. also D'Amico 1988, 178f.; Christopher B. Krebs, *A most dangerous book: Tacitus'* Germania *from the Roman Empire to the Third Reich*. W. W. Norton & Company, New York and London 2011, 98–104).

3 D'Amico 1988, 112f.; Krebs 2011, 247f. On the timely rediscovery and the initial impact of Tacitus' *Germania*, see Schellhase 1976, 32–49; Krebs 2011, 56–128.

4 E.g. Hirstein 1995, 1999 and 2001; Cf. Peter Schäffer, "Beatus Rhenanus als Tacitus-Rezipient". *Annuaire de la Société des Amis de la Bibliothèque de Sélestat* 35, 1985, 149–156.

unaffected by both the intellectual and political currents of the time, which will help us to contextualise his way of interpreting the Tacitean references to the qualities of the ancient *Germani*. Like the rest of his contemporaries, Rhenanus was reading Tacitus' *Germania* in its ostensible guise of an ethnographic treatise, and not as the political opinion piece that it is nowadays seen as, though his philological method tended to be more critical than that of many other German humanists.[5] I suggest that the broader macropolitical context – especially the acutely perceived threat of the surgent Ottoman power – led Rhenanus to engage with Tacitus' image of the ancient Germans in very specific and highly interesting ways, which cast some new light on the vagaries of Tacitean reception, but also on the European history of ideas in this febrile period.

The northerners' *fecunditas* and *ferocia* in classical literature

Over-abundance of both natural and human reproduction forms a typical motif of the utopian literary register, but one which often came close to having sinister undertones.[6] There were two cardinal directions which in the Greek thinking were intimately associated with the notion of 'numberless barbarians': the East, and the North. Both areas attracted the attribute of high population numbers in the first place through historical contacts and an epistemic salience in the Greek worldview, but in regard to both areas this element changed in due course into a literary topos or cliché. The most formative occasion for the rise of these images was the period of the Persian Wars, which otherwise, too, has been shown to have been quite crucial for the Greek perception of non-Greek societies, particularly the eastern ones.[7] The image of brave and outnumbered Greeks facing the innumerable armies of the King of Kings is, in all its crude but dramatic appeal, an almost obvious outcome from such a setup,

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5 On Rhenanus' way of reading Tacitus, Schäffer 1985; Hirstein 1995, 275; Muhlack 2001; Thomas Renna, "The Reception of Tacitus' *Germania* by the German humanists: from Provence to Empire". *Quidditas* 37, 2016, 111–150, 118. For the broader context, see Paul Joachimsen, "Tacitus im deutschen Humanismus". *Gesammelte Aufsätze. Beiträge zu Renaissance, Humanismus und Reformation*. Edited by Paul Joachimsen and Notker Hammerstein. Scientia Verlag, Aalen 1970, 275–295; Also Renna 2016. On Tacitus' aims in *Germania*, e.g. Ellen O'Gorman, "No place like Rome: Identity and Difference in the *Germania* of Tacitus". *Ramus* 22, 1993, 135–54; Rhiannon Ash, *Tacitus*. Bristol Classical Press, Bristol 2006, 31–39.

6 See Rhiannon Evans, *Utopia Antiqua. Readings of the Golden Age and Decline at Rome*. Routledge, London and New York 2008, 17ff., pointing out the sinister implications of the 'heightened fecundity and involuntary production', though mostly in connection with the East. Structurally, however, the geographical space of North and West was quite as apt to attract the theme: cf. Pomp. Mela 3.47, Lucian *VH* 2.9.

7 Edith Hall, *Inventing the Barbarian. Greek self-definition through tragedy*. Oxford University Press, Oxford 1989.

and the moralizing potential of the imagery is likewise easy to see.[8] In particular, the Greeks felt it comforting to imagine the numberless manpower of the Persian kings to lead to unavoidable eastern hubris and the consequent fall.[9] They themselves were nourished just enough by their poor landscape, and hence had to rely on their own innate bravery instead of numbers.[10]

But not just the easterners get called populous by the great historian of the Persian Wars, Herodotus: he particularly singles out the Thracians as innumerable in strength, the second most populous people of the world after Indians – a notion which is echoed by Thucydides on the Scythians.[11] This free borrowing and ambivalence between northern groups is quite typical. Subsequently, as the Hellenistic Greeks were faced with the new, frightening barbarian groups in the northern direction – groups often conventionally called 'Celts' – it was quite understandable that they were likewise 'numberless as snowflakes'.[12] Of the two reputedly populous regions, the indistinct, continental North became in time associated with the broader geographical entity of Europe. In particular, the 'numberless tribes of the Celts' became an impressive and worrying image in the minds of the Romans.[13] The epistemic salience of the image was maintained and even emphasized by the repeated Roman alarms in connection with groups of northerners: the Cimbric Wars (113–101 BCE), the *clades Lolliana* (16 BCE) and the *clades Variana* (9 CE), as well as the Gallic unrest during Nero's last

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8 The innumerable manpower of the Persian Empire is the recognizable subtext e.g. in Aesch. *Pers.* 230–45; Hdt. 1.136.1; Plat. *Leg.* 697e–698a; The motif became an enduring one, and crops up, for instance, in the Persian ethnographies of Str. 15.3.12 and Amm. 23.6. Cf. Hall 1989, 70–86, 93–8; Erich S. Gruen, *Rethinking the Other in Antiquity*. Princeton University Press, Princeton 2011, 12. A related idea is the notion of spontaneous, self-generating growth of all natural things in India: see e.g. Hdt. 3.106; Str. 15.1.22; Cf. James S. Romm, *The Edges of the Earth in Ancient Thought: Geography, Exploration, and Fiction*. Princeton University Press, Princeton 1992, 87ff.; Evans 2008, 17.

9 Hall 1989, 70.

10 See [Hippoc.] *Aer*. 12, 16, 23–24; Cf, Hdt. 9.122. See Charles Chiasson, "Scythian Androgyny and Environmental Determinism in Herodotus and the Hippocratic περὶ ἀέρων ὑδάτων τόπων". *Syllecta Classica* 12, 2001, 33–73.

11 Hdt. 5.3.1 on Thracians; Thuc. 2.97.6. On these early instances of unease about the numerousness of northerners: David Asheri, "Herodotus on Thracian Society and History". *Hérodote et les peuples non Grecs*. Edited by Walter Burkert *et al*. Fondation Hardt, Vandoeuvres and Geneva 1990, 131–63, 137f.; Isaac 2004, 265–68.

12 Callim. *Hymn* 4.171-76, in itself an allusion to Hdt. 4.7.3 and 31. The idea of 'Celts' and Galatians being particularly prone to unbridled burgeoning of their numbers is attested by e.g. Livy 38.16.13, Just. 25.2.8f.

13 The expression is that of Simyl. *De Tarpeia* 724 *SH ap.* Plut. *Rom.* 17.7, but other classical instances of this trope abound: Apoll. Rhod. *Argon.* 4.635-47; Polyb. 2.35.9; Caes. *BGall.* 1.29; Diod. Sic. 14.113.1; Livy 7.32.2, 10.10.6, 24.47.7 (projecting the recognition of their numerical superiority to the Gallic thinking), 38.16.10-13; Vell. Pat. 2.106; Paus. 1.4.5; Just. 24.4, 25.2; *Pan. Lat.* 6.6.4; Oros. 7.37.4; *Chron. Gall. 452*, 61; Soz. 2.6.2.

years and the Batavian uprising (68–70 CE), which all made Romans highly nervous about the potential threat posed by northern groups.

Both aspects that made the North so dangerous in the Greco-Roman imagination, namely the intrinsic qualities of the inhabitants and their great numbers, could be explained by climatically articulated reasoning. The bodies of the northerners are *mollia et fluida* on account of the moisture, which in the cold climate does not evaporate.[14] The inner heat that the northerners need to combat the coldness of their environment leads to mental features of irascibility and violence (*ferocia*), and was often used to conceptualise the genesis of the stereotypically northern *ferocitas*.[15] This climatological trope was even more highly evaluated by the Early Modern historians than the Roman writers.[16] From the early enemy group of Gauls, it was not difficult to apply this motif to other northern groups, as well, for instance under such truisms as *atrox caelum, perinde ingenia*.[17] Climatic (or environmental) explanation models also ensured that the northern and western directions were treated increasingly as an ensemble, exhibiting common properties both in nature and ethnography, with many shared characteristics applied to a vast range of peoples.[18]

Fecunditas seems to be a passable denomination for the literary trope of numberless northerners, as the term is capable of including both the actual notions about the (climatically and culturally explained) over-increase of the northern populations, and the literary, stylistically inherited and used *topos*. Naturally, these two modes of usage would have been interconnected, and drawn epistemic reinforcement from each other – just like the idea of fertile north was made even more worrying by the perceived ferocity of the northerners' innate character. It should also be noted that in literary set piece descriptions, even when foreign groups are described, the literary

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14 Sen. *Ira* 2.19; Cf. Vitr. *Arch.* 6.1.10 (see Georgia L. Irby, "Climate and courage". *The Routledge Handbook of Identity and the Environment in the Classical and Medieval Worlds*. Edited by Rebecca Futo Kennedy and Molly Jones-Lewis. Routledge, London 2016, 247–265, 253).

15 Irby 2016 explores well the connections between climatic effects and bravery.

16 Borchardt 1971, 181.

17 Flor. *Epit.* 1.37.

18 Cf. Allan A. Lund, *Zum Germanenbild der Römer. Eine Einführung in die antike Ethnographie*. C. Winter, Heidelberg 1990, 75; The mental underpinnings of this are further elucidated by Paul T. Keyser, "Greek Geography of the Western Barbarians". *The Barbarians of the Ancient Europe*. Edited by Larissa Bonfante. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2011, 37–70. The broad-brush approach of the environmental-determinist models, with most of the continent's inhabitants were seen as influenced by the same conditions (see Evans 2008, 24–30; James S. Romm, "Continents, Climates, and Cultures: Greek Theories of Global Structure". *Geography and Ethnography: Perceptions of the World in Pre-Modern Societies*. Edited by Kurt A. Raaflaub and Richard J. A. Talbert. Wiley-Blackwell, Chichester 2010, 215–235, esp. 226 onwards) was further reinforced by other theoretical structures, such as the astrological framework exemplified in Ptol. *Tetr.* 3.13.159-165.

emulation and allusiveness become occasionally paramount.[19] This is often the case with other uses of the trope of *fecunditas*, too: its attestations do not need to always signify an active imagery of fear towards out-groups or groups of 'outsiders inside': it can rather represent a simple rhetorical case of *aemulatio* or a 'Komplimentzitat'.[20]

Another commonly met element in expressions of the threateningly populous north is that of *multitudo*, often coupled with attributes like *fanatica* (which Tacitus used of the followers of a Gallic religious leader called Mariccus in 69 CE), or a more definite term elaborating on the threat of such a worrying mass.[21] In Tacitus, the motif of fertility could be more easily affixed to certain aspects of animal reproduction in the Germanic lands rather than their demographic growth, since the historian's purpose was to demonstrate the moral purity of the 'free' Germans when compared with the depraved urban society of the imperial Rome.[22] Hence, for example, Tacitus notes in his heavily epideictic and ironic treatment of the Germanic marriage customs and sexual ethics (as opposed to the perceived decadence of his Roman contemporaries), that the few occasions of polygyny among the Germans are solely the result of marriage alliances among the noblest families, and not deriving from sexual voraciousness (*libido*).[23] Moreover, although the young people among them marry late, and extramarital affairs are almost non-existent (19-20), this does not result in low population numbers; Tacitus manages to incorporate the notional image of the populous north with his morally righteous barbarians by noting that there are no benefits for childlessness among them (20: *nec ulla orbitatis pretia*), and that abandoning new-borns or limiting birth-rate artificially is judged disgraceful (19: *numerum liberorum finire aut quemquam ex adgnatis necare flagitium habetur, plusque ibi boni mores valent quam alibi bonae leges*). One can see that Tacitus' moralising but positive twist on the old idea of numberless northerners would have offered potentially rather useful-seeming materials for the Renaissance scholars to reapply and develop further.

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19 A very good example is Tac. *Germ.* 5.1, which adapts Sall. *Iug.* 17.5 in a very obvious way, engaging in the conventions of the ethnographical register about barbarian groups and lands: cf. Renato Oniga, *Sallustio e l'etnografia*. Giardini, Pisa 1995, 44.

20 The presence of these 'complimentary citations' should be noted throughout the classical reception, not just in antiquity: cf. Hirstein 1995, 169.

21 Tac. *Hist.* 2.61. See *hominum est infinita multitudo* Caes. *BGall.* 5.12 on Britons, aiming to justify his brief stay on the island; *Galli abundante multitudine* in Just. 24.4.1; *Immanem ex diversis Germanorum populis multitudinem* from whom Constantius Chlorus safeguards the empire in *Pan. Lat.* 6.6.4.

22 For more, see Dietmar Willoweit, "Von der alten deutschen Freiheit. Zur verfassungsgeschichtlichen Bedeutung der Tacitus-Rezeption". *Vom normativen Wandel des Politischen. Rechst- und stattsphilosophisches Kolloquium aus Anlaß des 70. Geburtstages von Hans Ryffel*. Edited by Erik Volkman Heyen. Duncker & Humblot, Berlin 1984, 17–42.

23 Tac. *Germ.* 18–20.

Rhenanus' references to *fecunditas* and *ferocia*

So, considering the visibility of the motif of fertility and manpower in classical texts seeking to explain the success and dangerousness of the northerners, it could be expected to feature as an important aspect of Rhenanus' conception of German antiquities in the *Res Germanicae*. When we look at Rhenanus' use – and his omissions – of the trope of fecundity or *multitudo*, it is not surprising that the majority of these references occur in the Book 1, since Book 2 is of modest length, and Book 3 deals mostly with a place-by-place enarration of German local histories, partly on the basis of structural remains still extant in his day. Another point explaining this preponderance is that in Book 1, Rhenanus was preoccupied with giving his readers a narrative of the ancient German history as reflected in the works of the classical authors.

The references to the old trope of the populous north are usually accompanied by some emphasis which seems to take the crux of the argument away from population numbers. This is the case, for instance, with Rhenanus' etymologizing take on Odoacer's name, which he interprets as deriving from the expression for a 'populator of lands'; consequently, he moves with *ingentiis Herulorum copiis*.[24] There are also several instances in which Rhenanus avoids using the theme of fecundity in a passage that would with some probability have featured it in antiquity, in particular as an explanatory factor for the success of the barbarians or a root cause for their troubling migrations. For instance, in *RG* I.1.2 Rhenanus talks about the *externi populi* who came to inhabit areas of *Germania Vetus*, including a reference to the Gallic migrations under Elitovius, which Livy attributes to the nearly incredible population growth among the Gauls.[25] This particular locus of Livy was one of the classical passages in which Rhenanus chose in his 1535 edition to make a tendentious departure from his ancient source: he reads the Gauls under Elitovius to have actually been *Germani*, founding the towns of Brescia, Bergamo (from the German 'Berg') and Verona.[26] It may be suggested that in the wake of the Italian wars between the Habsburgs and the French, Rhenanus did not want to imply these important towns of Northern Italy to have been founded by the notional ancestors of the French.[27] Under the intermediate heading '*Germanorum veterum emigrationes*', one could expect to find several references to the motif of *sponte sua* generation leading to over-

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24 Beat. Rh. *RG* I.5.8 (Felix Mundt, *Beatus Rhenanus. Rerum Germanicarum libri tres (1531). Ausgabe, Übersetzung, Studien*. Max Niemeyer Verlag, Tübingen 2008), 174.

25 Beat. Rh. *RG* I.1.2 (Mundt 2008, 36); Cf. Livy 5.34-36; Cf. Just. *Epit.* 24.4.1-3.

26 Beatus Rhenanus, *T. Livii Patavini Latinae historiae principis decades tres cum dimitia*. Hervagius, Basel 1535, *ad* Liv. 5.35; Cf. *RG* I.3.2.1 (Mundt 2008, 68).

27 Cf. Len E. Scales, "*Germen Militiae*: War and German Identity in the Later Middle Ages". *Past & Present* 180, 2003, 41–82, 50f. on the competition between Germans and French regarding the Frankish pedigree (more exactly the Carolingian heritage).

population and migrations – the standard explanation in antiquity and very present in Livy's Book 5 – but the theme is conspicuously subdued.[28] The same is true for the reasoning behind the migrations of the Saxons: Rhenanus rather admits his ignorance about their reasons (*quam ob causam nescio*) than applies the otherwise wholly available trope of demographic over-abundance.[29] Even though this openness may simply be a case of intellectual honesty, it is nonetheless a marked departure from the style of his classical sources.

In *RG* I.3.2.2 (Mundt 2008, 68) Rhenanus does refer to the two pre-eminent reasons for population movements: that the emigrants would have a more bountiful land to inhabit (*ut melius atque uberius solum haberent*), or that they leave their homeland under population pressure (*praegravante multitudine regio patria levaretur*). He would have known well the use into which Caesar had put these same explanations when presenting his account for the migration of the Helvetii in 58 BCE.[30] He goes on to cite a speech Tacitus had put into the mouth of Petillius Cerialis, in which the Roman general attributes slightly different reasons as the eternal motivator for Germans to intrude into Gaul: their venal greed, their love of constant movement (*libido atque avaritia et mutandae sedis amor*) and their wish to exchange their sordid swamps for the fecund lands of Gaul.[31] Next, Rhenanus refers to the earlier migration of the Cimbri and Teutones, and explains them solely by the rationale of *bonitas agri* in Gaul, not any growth of Germanic numbers. The only increase in the power of these wandering groups comes from the joining of the Gallic Tigurini and Ambrones with them.[32] In the *Res Germanicae*'s account of the Alemanni, the explanation for their depredations seems to be in the first place their wish to *mutare sedes* (a verbal echo from Tacitus), followed by a reference to the *multitudo potentissimorum populorum* – but only as an explanation to the direction of the Alemannic attacks against Rome, and their adoption of their 'new, glory-bringing name', the 'All Men'.[33]

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28 Beat. Rh. *RG* I.3.2 (Mundt 2008, 68–86).

29 Beat. Rh. *RG* I.5.14 (Mundt 2008, 187f.).

30 Caes. *BGall.* 1.2-29. Behind this imagery there stood the Hellenistic and even earlier theories of the reasons for northerners to migrate: references to the intrinsically mobile ways of the northerners include Hdt. 1.6, 1.15-16, 4.11; Posid. F 272b *ap.* Str. 7.2.2; Diod. Sic. 5.32.4; Livy *Per.* 63; Trogus *ap.* Just. *Epit.* 2.2; Amm. 31.2.4, 10. Explanations about natural calamities (especially the inundations of the Ocean) pushing northerners to move include Ar. *Eth. Nic.* 1115b, *Eth. Eud.* 1229b; Eph. F 132 (*BNJ* 70) *ap.* Str. 7.2.1; Cic. *Prov. cons.* 32; Nic. Dam. (*BNJ* 90) F 109 *ap.* Stob. *Flor.* 7.40; Flor. *Epit.* 1.38, 3.3.1; [Quint.] *Decl. Maior*. 3.4.5; Ael. *VH* 12.23; Amm. 15.9.4, 31.8.5; Oros. *Hist.* 7.37.4. Hellenistic sources also saw Celts as intrinsically seeking new lands to settle: Euph. Chalc. *ap. EtMag s.v.* Γαιζήται; *De mul. claris in bello* (Gera 1997) 10; Zos. 2.37.1.

31 Tac. *Hist.* 4.73.3. Tacitus, probably consciously, attributes to Germans the same reasons that Caesar had invented when he was justifying his actions against Ariovistus, a 'friend and ally' of the Roman state (see Caes. *BGall.* 1.31-33).

32 Beat. Rh. *RG* I.3.2.2 (Mundt 2008, 70).

33 Beat. Rh. *RG* I.4.2 (Mundt 2008, 110).

Again in connection with the Alemanni – perhaps in negotiation with the meaning of their name – Rhenanus later notes, when discussing the reasons for the toponymic changes of German locales in Book 3, that the emperor Julian slew untold number of them with his smaller army in the battle of Strasbourg. The passage does not attribute genuine explanatory power for this detail, instead seemingly recording it on account of Ammianus Marcellinus' authority, and because the Alemannic history was quite central for Rhenanus' own home area near Strasbourg. Generally, Rhenanus could not have been unaware of the idea – widespread in the Roman era, and very frequently used by Tacitus – about the way in which northern adversaries' reckless, emotional *ferocitas* could be resisted successfully with the Roman martial *virtus* – an ideal quality that sought to portray the Roman male as brave but rational in battle.[34] But it is likewise easy to see why sticking to this received pattern might not have been an attractive option to him.

Some of the references to the great manpower among the barbarians are clearly just conventional phrases, such as *infinitis millibus hostium occisis* or *multitudo Francorum*.[35] Others are derived straight from the ancient sources themselves.[36] In other instances, such as when Rhenanus cites Justin's Imperial-era *Epitome* of Pompeius Trogus' *Philippic Histories* on the *immensa millia ferorum atque immitium populorum* he leaves the content of the testimony uncommented. A much more appealing historico-ethnographic horizon would have been provided by the Cimbri as they were featured after their famous exploits in Tacitus' own time: *parva nunc civitas sed gloria ingens; veterisque famae lata vestigia manent*.[37] I would argue that this was close to Rhenanus' own preferred view of the Germanic historical inheritance: they constituted an illustrious and far-reaching people in the scale of whole Europe, who had never obtained their victories by numbers alone, but by their

[34] On the binary image of wild, reckless and fierce northerners versus the rational, brave and stoic Roman soldier, see Livy 38.17; Vitr. *Arch.* 6.1.10; Sen. *Ira* 2.15; Tac. *Ann.* 2.17, 2.25, 2.64, 3.40, 3.47, 4.46-7, 11.19, 12.20, 12.33, 14.38, 15.27; *Hist.* 1.59, 1.68, 1.79, 3.45, 5.11, 5.15, 5.18, *Agr.* 11, 31, 37; Veget. *Strat.* 1.2; From the scholarship, see especially Jon Coulston, "Courage and Cowardice in the Roman Imperial Army". *War in History* 20, 2013, 7–31, 14–25; Irby 2016; Rhiannon Evans, "'Angry, Reckless, Savage': Problematising the Hypermasculine *Germani*". *Toxic Masculinity in the Ancient World*. Edited by Melanie Racette-Campbell and Aven McMaster. Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh 2023, 150–60; On Tacitus' usages regarding *ferocia*, in particular, see Henry W. Traub, "Tacitus' Use of *Ferocia*". *TAPA* 84, 1953, 250–261, 252f.; Of the reception of these ideas, see Craig D. Taylor, "Military Courage and Fear in the Late Medieval French Chivalric Imagination". *Cahiers de recherces médiévales et humanistes* 24, 2012, 129–147, esp. 138–41; Also Scales 2003.

[35] Beat. Rh. *RG* I.1.3 (Mundt 2008, 42), I.4.1 (Mundt 2008, 98f.).

[36] E.g. *RG* I.4.1 (Mundt 2008, 92).

[37] Tac. *Germ.* 37.1.

ancestral and intrinsic warlike vigour.[38] In his *Castigationes* (corrective *scholia*) to Tacitus he notes that the Germans had retained more of their ancestral martial ferocity than the Gauls (*nos avitae ferociae plusculum retinemus*).[39]

In his extensive chapter on the history of Franks, Rhenanus explains the multiple *duces* of that *gens* by its great population numbers.[40] It may be of relevance that Rhenanus did not feel the need to expunge the motif of burgeoning growth from his treatment of the 'ancestors' of the French, since in other ways too he seems to have had in mind to avoid glorifying the Franks.[41] Other German humanists opted for other ways of negotiating around any implied Frankish primacy. Franciscus Irenicus, for instance, turned the Trojan forefathers of the Franks into descendants, in themselves, of the Germans.[42]

Throughout the three books of *Res Germanicae* there are also frequent references to the quality of land, but this element – which for instance in Livy is met in clear connection with the motif of over-abundance and burgeoning populations – is not linked with demographic increase *expressis verbis*. Here, we can contrast Livy's usage in Book 5 to Rhenanus' subdued handling of the theme in the first book of *Res Germanicae*.[43] This is partly explicable by the comparative lack of salience for the ancient climatological models in Rhenanus' own thinking, whereas it strongly conditioned the descriptions of Livy, Pliny, Tacitus, and Roman writers regarding the northerners.[44] Occasionally traces of the classical view are filtered into Rhenanus' paraphrases, but he by no means uses the northern climate as the definitive explanatory factor for the northerners' physical and mental makeup. Occasionally,

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38 The aspect of the far-reaching *Germania Vetus* comes across well in the scope of Rhenanus' narrative: Hirstein 1995, 171–8; Cf. also Borchardt 1971, 14. On the agenda of many Early Modern German humanists, seeking to vindicate their history from the claims advanced by Italian and French scholars: D'Amico 1988, 174f.

39 Beat. Rh. *Cast.* 423. On this accruing set of notes to Tacitus, see Kevin Bovier, *La Renaissance de Tacite. Commenter les* Histoires *et les* Annales *au XVI^e siècle*. Schwabe Verlag, Basel 2022, 41–56.

40 Beat. Rh. *RG* I.4.1 (Mundt 2008, 104).

41 Cf. George Huppert, "The Trojan Franks and their Critics". *Studies in the Renaissance* 12, 1965, 227–241, 232f. On Rhenanus' debunking of the Trojan origin story for the Franks in *Res Germanicae*, and the cool reception this critical approach had in France.

42 Iren. *Exeg.* 48; See Borchardt 1971, 144; Renna 2016, 118.

43 Livy 5.34; Cf. Beat. Rh. *RG* I.6.4 (Mundt 2008, 194). On Rhenanus' edition of Livy's first decade, see Martine Chassignet, "Beatus Rhenanus, éditeur de la premiere decade de Tite-Live (Bâle, 1535)". *Beatus Rhenanus (1485-1547), lecteur et éditeur des textes anciens. Actes du colloque international tenu à Strasbourg et à Sélestat du 13 au 15 novembre 1998*. Edited by James S. Hirstein. Brepols, Turnhout 2001, 397–410.

44 Cf. Hirstein 1995, 210f. Among the earlier German writers, one can point to how Conrad of Megenberg (d. 1374) adopted the climatological ethnography of the northerners in ancient literature wholesale to characterize the Germans of his own day: see Scales 2003, 76, who also points out the tendency among Medieval German writers to transpose typical northern topoi from the ancient literature either northwards or eastwards.

he does interpret climatological stock elements as flattering to Germans, as James Hirstein has noted.[45]

Overall, we can observe that Rhenanus was selective in his reading of Tacitus, just as all the other Renaissance humanists were, though perhaps his selections were more often explained through philological argumentation than was common in his day.[46] Rhenanus' scholarly negotiation as an editor and commentator with the religious questions of his time have been noted earlier,[47] but a corresponding level of engagement and awareness can be found to emerge from his view on the secular history. Whilst we have begun to detect certain unique choices and omissions especially in what it comes to his handling of the themes of *fecunditas* and *ferocia*, other Early Modern scholars, particularly when engaged in the etymologizing register, also engaged with the ancient stereotype of northern fecundity. As an example, the early-15th-century *Cosmodromium* of Gobelinus Persona derives the geographical name *Germania* from the ever-increasing population of that region: the underlying etymology is that of the Latin *germen* ('sprout') and *germanus* ('sibling').[48] This is, however, not a creative departure, but essentially derived from Isidore of Seville: *terra dives virum ac populis numerosis et immanibus; unde et propter fecunditatem gignendorum populorum Germania dicta est*.[49] For Rhenanus, however, this etymology of the name *Germani* would probably have held little explanatory power, since he could compare it with the more philologically attractive (and flattering) Tacitean explanation.[50]

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45 Hirstein 1995, 214.

46 Borchardt 1971, 180; Krebs 2011, 120.

47 D'Amico 1988, 173.

48 On Gobelinus Persona's etymology, see Borchardt 1971, 29, and on etymology as a tool for the Renaissance scholars, Frank L. Borchardt, "Etymology in Tradition and in the Northern Renaissance". *JHI* 29, 1968, 415–29, 424–29, including other explanations relying on the 'brotherly' meaning of *Germani*, and discussion on Rhenanus' own approach (428).

49 Isid. *Etym.* 14.4.4 (cf. 9.2.97, also e.g. *Cosm. Aeth.* 29). This explanation was also picked up by Paul the Deacon (*HL* 1.1-3), and could have reached the Renaissance scholars via multiple routes, each affirming the other. Isidore also included another etymology for the *Germani*, namely that they have 'sprouted' such great bodies (*Etym.* 9.2.97), a notion firmly connected to the ancient stereotypes, and climatologically explained.

50 Cf. Beat. Rh. *RG* I.3.2.4 (Mundt 2008, 72–4), essentially trusting in Tac. *Germ.* 2.3, but explaining that Tacitus' point about the name *Germani* being *recens et nuper additum* is true only in relation to the 'more ancient' names of Marsi, Gambrivi, and Suevi. Tacitus had explained *Germani* to be a newer name for the tribe of Tungri, turned from an exonym into an endonym for all Germans – but without giving an actual etymology for the name itself. The *germen*-etymology was probably known to his Roman audience, carrying ideas about frighteningly great numbers of northerners.

Explaining Beatus Rhenanus' preference of some Tacitean motifs over others

From what has been observed above, it emerges that the primary explanation for Rhenanus' lack of use for the trope of northern fecundity had much to do with its lack of salience for his thinking. As an explanation for the eventual outcome of the rise of 'Germanic' kingdoms after the fall of the Roman Empire, the multitude and great demographic increase of the northerners was decisively less flattering than the notion of their martial excellence and fierce bravery.[51] This constituted the main departure from the ancient iconosphere, which lifted the great northern manpower and the population's replacement rate into a source of fear and unease, as well as using them to partly explain why *tam diu Germania vincitur*, to use the words of Tacitus.[52] Even more to the point, in the Early Modern Europe a great pace of demographic growth would no doubt have been comparatively difficult to turn into a source of pride; it was a feature of more primal societies, and characterized in the classical exemplary texts in ways that were hard to interpret favourably.[53] On the other hand it could have evoked thoughts of libidinous excess, which had by now become a feature affixed in a polemical way to the 'corrupted South', such as when Conrad Celtis condemned the bad influence of 'Italian sensuality' on the stout, virtuous Germans.[54] In this endeavour, the German humanists were aided by Tacitus' own moralizing register, which had sought to mitigate the more sensuous implications of the traditional idea of European barbarians' great demographic increase; essentially, Rome represented moral corruption in many ways for both Tacitus and his Early Modern trans-Alpine reception.

Another consideration that is likely to have motivated Rhenanus' highly surprising resistance to the option of using the idea of Germanic fecundity is the 'fear of the Turk', evidenced in various guises in many European writings of the early 16th

51 As explained by Scales 2003, this – via the etymological notion of *germen militiae* – had been central to German self-representation already in the Later Middle Ages. Cf.

52 Tac. *Germ.* 37.

53 This aspect of the imagined Germanic antiquity did receive a sordid afterlife as an admirable, emulable trait during the 1930s: cf. Krebs 2011, 220.

54 Conr. Celt. *Or.* 66 (Hans Rupprich, *Oratio in Gymnasio in Ingelstadio publice recitata: cum carminibus ad Orationem pertinentibus*. Teubner, Leipzig 1932).

century.[55] After being defeated at Pavia by the Imperial forces of Charles V in 1525, King Francis I of France sought to create an anti-Habsburg alliance with the Sultan: this plan resulted in negotiations already during 1526, and culminated in the Franco-Ottoman alliance in 1536.[56] Rhenanus' own point of vantage might have affected his values and estimations regarding the situation. As noted by John D'Amico, '[t]he moral-patriotic-imperial qualities were especially strong in Alsace and in those contemporary historians who would have influenced Beatus'.[57] Already in March 1519, in a letter to Huldrych Zwingli, Rhenanus had expressed his fears about the French plans against *nostra Germania*.[58] Besides this local interest, there were the typical politics of origin. In Rhenanus' mind the Trojan origin stories for the Turks could still have been to some extent salient – they had, after all, been propagated as recently as the late 15th century – and denying such a genealogical link between the two current allies against the Empire, the French and the Ottoman, would no

[55] See e.g. Krebs 2011, 82–5 on the significance of the perceptions about the Ottoman Empire in the context of Tacitus' reception. Timothy Hampton, "'Turkish Dogs': Rabelais, Erasmus, and the Rhetoric of Alterity". *Representations* 41, 1993, 58–82, 59, notes that the presence of the Ottoman realm in the European east occupied the Early Modern humanist thought, especially the more Christian variety (such as Erasmus, Rhenanus' associate), through both political panic and moral confusion. See also Peter Madsen, "Stars, Signs, and Tears: Turkish Threats, Politics, and Apocalyptic Historiography in Sebastian Brant". *Framing 'Turks': Representations of Ottomans and Moors in Continental European Literature 1453-1683*. Edited by Peter Madsen. *Nordic Journal of Renaissance Studies* 16, 2019, 69–96; Malcolm 2019.

[56] For the Franco-Ottoman diplomacy and the European reactions to it, see e.g. De Lamar Jensen, "The Ottoman Turks in Sixteenth Century French Diplomacy". *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 16, 1985, 451–70; Also Noel Malcolm, *Useful Enemies. Islam and the Ottoman Empire in Western Political Thought, 1450-1750*. Oxford University Press, Oxford 2019, 111–130. Hampton 1993, 61 points to the significance of the hostilities during the 1520s for the imagery of the Turks in Rabelais (especially as he was writing in the realm of Francis I), and that during that decade Luther, too, reversed his earlier optimistic position regarding the providentiality of the Turkish successes against the ailing, corrupted Christendom. He goes on to point out the ambiguity of Erasmus' position (62–4), articulated in the greatest length in his *Utilissima consultatio de bello Turcis inferendo* of 1530, partly through tropes such as *gens est effoeminata luxu* (though Erasmus also argued that as Muslims, Ottomans were 'semi-Christians': Malcolm 2019, 40, cf. 77).

[57] D'Amico 1988, 174.

[58] Beat. Rh. *Ep.* 11; See Robert Walter, *Beatus Rhenanus: un grand humaniste alsacien et son époque: citoyen de Sélestat, ami d'Érasme (1485-1547): anthologie de sa correspondance*. Librairie Oberlin, Strasbourg 1986, 183, and 185 n. 6. The same letter also discusses the anticipated action against the Turks. For Rhenanus' correspondence, one should principally consult James Hirstein *et al.*, *Epistulae Beati Rhenani: la Correspondance latine et grecque de Beatus Rhenanus de Sélestat, Edition critique raisonnée, avec traduction et commentaire, vol. 1 (1506-1517)*. Brepols, Turnhout 2013, which replaces Adalbert Horawitz and Karl Hardfelder, *Briefwechsel des Beatus Rhenanus*. Teubner, Leipzig 1886.

doubt have been desirable.[59] As time went on, Trojan origin stories for the Turks gave partially way to explanations that emphasized a connection to Scythians, a more obviously externalising aetiology.[60] Noteworthy in connection with the contemporary politics is also Rhenanus' citation, in full, of Agathias' characterization of the alleged custom of the Merovingian kings to wear their hair long.[61] The same passage in Agathias included a comparison of the Frankish hair with the stereotypically unkempt and matted long hair of the Turks and Avars. Rhenanus would have used the Latin translation of Agathias that was published in 1531 at Basel,[62] and in which the Avars have been excised, so that the parallelism was created specifically between the Franks and the Turks.

The naval hostilities in the Mediterranean, the battle of Mohács in 1527, and the siege of Vienna in 1529 had heightened the apprehension felt about the Ottomans, and even as Rhenanus was finishing his *Res Germanicae* expectations were no doubt building up in Europe regarding Suleiman's inevitable response to Habsburg campaigns of 1530. Rhenanus points to this underlying concern at a rather prominent textual *locus*, namely the very end of his proemial *Epistula*, addressed at Ferdinand I, the Habsburg king of Bohemia and Hungary and the future Holy Roman Emperor, who is occupied by the *bellis contra grassabundos Christianae religionis hostes Turcas*.[63] In this, Rhenanus' *Res Germanicae* is related to the works of his contemporaries Rabelais and Erasmus, "at a particular moment of political hysteria".[64] The idea of the 'emperor of the Romans' leading the Christian response against the Turks had even apocalyptic resonances in some writers,[65] but Rhenanus approaches the propagandistic, triumphalist theme from a different angle:

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59 See Anthony F. D'Elia, "Genealogy and the Limits of Panegyric: Turks and Huns in Fifteenth-Century Epithalamia". *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 34, 2003, 973–91, esp. 986–88; Jensen 1985.

60 E.g. Margaret Meserve, "Medieval Sources for Renaissance Theories on the Origins of the Ottoman Turks". *Europa und die Türken in der Renaissance*. Edited by Bodo Guthmüller and Wilhelm Kühlmann. De Gruyter, Tübingen 2000, 410–436, 409–25; Felix Konrad, "From the 'Turkish Menace' to Exoticism and Orientalism: Islam as Antithesis of Europe (1453–1914)?". *EGO – European History Online*, 2011, 7–8. URL https://www.ieg-ego.eu/konradf-2010-en, retrieved 16.02.2025.

61 Beat. Rh. *RG* II.3.2.1; Agath. *Hist.* 1.3.2-4: the theme of long-hairedness itself was a Herodoteanizing cliché for Agathias (though Herodotus used it originally of Arabs); Priscus had used it of the Huns: cf. Averil M. Cameron, "How did the Merovingian Kings wear their hair?". *Revue belge de philologie et d'histoire* 43, 1965, 1203–1216, 1213f.

62 Cf. D'Amico 1988, 112.

63 The letter is also edited as Beat. Rh. *Ep.* 16 (Walter 1986, 247–64). Borchardt 1971, 21 notes that for the Renaissance scholars, the prominence of their contemporary German emperors had been prefigured in the help of Germanic auxiliaries that Caesar had had in overthrowing Pompey.

64 Hampton 1993, 63.

65 Cf. Madsen 2019, e.g. 78–79, noting moreover how even a visionary like Sebastian Brant found space for praising German fighting spirit (81).

the ancestral German warlike virtues.[66] The idea of the ancient Germanic *ferocia* predicting renewed western triumphs over Turks was based on a strongly felt logic that ancient *exempla* were a useful way of thinking about historical processes and risks. In the same spirit, and with considerable historical licence, Johannes Aventinus' *Annales Boiorum* (written in 1517–21) portrayed the ancient Bavarians defeating the Persians.[67] The exemplarity was not only logical and politically expedient, but also no doubt comforting. It is notable that already Enea Silvio Piccolomini, the future pope Pius II, exhorted the Germans to show their 'ancestral' courage and warlike vigour in the face of the Turkish threat.[68] In a famous address to the Imperial diet at Frankfurt in 1454 Piccolomini also referred to the much vaster manpower of his contemporary Germany in comparison with the one during the First Crusade.[69] The vast expanse of the Ottoman Empire triggered understandable fears as to the innumerable manpower at the Sultan's command – notions with more than just a passing resemblance to the inherited proto-Orientalist tropes that had associated the East with burgeoning population numbers ever since Herodotus' *Histories* created the image of the 'ruler of all Asia'.[70] Even more importantly, as the genealogies connecting the Turks with the Trojans gave way to the more effectively externalizing connections with the Scythians, the classical trope of numberless Scythians would have appeared to tell something about the ancestors of the Christendom's current enemies.[71]

For writers working in the diverse lands of the Habsburgs, the French foreign policy and alliance-building may indeed have come across as traitorous to the cause of Christianity, and the sense of the German lands being encircled by hostile forces could have appeared natural.[72] This was to remain the case for the remainder of

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66 Cf. Norman J. Housley, "*Robur imperii*. Mobilizing Imperial Resources for the Crusade against the Turks, 1453-1505". *Partir en croisade à la fin du Moyen Âge: Financement et logistique*. Edited by Daniel Baloup and Manuel Sánchez Martínez. Presses universitaires du Midi, Toulouse 2015, 287–306, 288f.

67 Borchardt 1971, 171.

68 Krebs 2011, 85, 92, cf. 96; For more in depth, see Norman J. Housley, "Aeneas Silvius Piccolomini, Nicholas of Cusa, and the Crusade: Conciliar, Imperial, and Papal Authority". *Church History* 86, 2017, 643–667.

69 See Housley 2015, 290f.

70 E.g. Hdt. 3.88. In the words of Enea Silvio Piccolomini at the Council of Basel, *magnum est imperium Turcorum, ingentes Asiaticorum vires* (*CC* 30, col. 1098 Mansi, quoted in Johannes Helmrath, "Pius II. und die Türken". *Europa und die Türken in der Renaissance*. Edited by Bodo Guthmüller and Wilhelm Kühlmann. De Gruyter, Tübingen 2000, 80–137, 89); See also Housley 2017.

71 See Meserve 2000, esp. 414–25.

72 Interestingly, the popular French view largely conformed to the rest of the western imagery regarding 'the Turk', though it was not propagated by the official discourse of the policy-shapers (for understandable reasons): cf. Klaus Malettke, "Die Vorstöße der Osmanen im 16. Jahrhundert aus französischer Sicht". *Europa und die Türken in der Renaissance*. Edited by Bodo Guthmüller and Wilhelm Kühlmann. De Gruyter, Tübingen 2000, 373–94, 387, 393f.

Beatus Rhenanus' life.[73] It is also quite clear that the demand for a more clearly defined German nationhood was much affected by this sense of being engaged against both the Turks and the French.[74] Effectively, the situation could have looked like the 'rightful' inheritors of the Roman/Carolingian imperial providentiality were now flanked by allied pretenders to the inheritance of Rome. In such a mental climate, the ancestors of the French, i.e. the Franks, could have received their share of this hostility, even in Rhenanus' *Res Germanicae*.[75]

Concluding thoughts

In the broader political and military situation described in the previous section, the demographic odds, too, would have appeared to be against the Holy Roman Emperor, whose lands were already witnessing the early stages of religious dissension.[76] I would argue that since the eastern societies, in the form of the Ottoman realm, continued to be such an acute subject of unease and alarm in the worldview of Beatus Rhenanus and his contemporaries, it naturally attracted the classical trope of numberlessness. This made fecundity less acceptable as a feature of the Germanic 'ancestors'. It would probably have been dissonant for the humanist writers to emphasize the great population growth of 'their' societies (in the guise of their ancestors) in a time when such a powerful and territorially extensive foe had become primed in their worldview. Against such a threat, the hope of the Christian Europe would have been lodged in the supposed ancestral *ferocitas* and the martial *virtus* of the 'Germanic' tradition, still retained among them.

Occasionally the silences of classical reception can help us tease out suggestions that are every bit as intriguing as conclusions made on the basis of the receiving authors' inclusions. What is crucial is to make sure that the author in question was otherwise aware of the element that they chose to ignore. Whilst the classical 'borealist' version of the topos of *fecunditas* emphasized the naturally generated, spontaneous multitude of the northerners, it was the more flattering topos of *ferocitas* – no longer as clearly alienating as in ancient Roman self-representation – that Rhenanus seems to have foregrounded. This was not out of ignorance of the existence of the topos of northern fertility. One might argue that during the first decades of the 16th century, while

[73] Cf. Walter 1986, 288–90, noting that at the time of his death, Rhenanus had turned his attention to a work examining the history of Illyria, the paradigmatic area between the 'Empires of Rome and Constantinople': this was published in 1552 by Frobenius as *Illyrici provinciarum utrique imperio, cum Romano, tum Constantinopolitano servientis descriptio* (Basel).

[74] Schellhase 1976, 38; Peter H. Wilson, "Still a Monstrosity? Some Reflections on Early Modern German Statehood". *The Historical Journal* 49, 2006, 565–576, 567. Cf. Scales 2003, 49 on the notion of the 'German people alone [as] the rightful custodians of the Christian Roman Empire'.

[75] Cf. Scales 2003, 50–3 with plentiful examples.

[76] Cf. the points made by Krebs 2011, 106.

the Ottoman sphere was engaged in a creative period of cross-cultural negotiation and development, the western humanist discourse was focused on finding the most reassuring historical *exempla* to be applied to a context that seemed increasingly embattled and insecure. As often is the case with such communication characterized by insecurity, the response took on a profoundly moralizing form.[77] Thus it is no great wonder that ancestral valour – instead of barbarously large numbers – emerged as the preferred martial motif for Rhenanus' 'ancient Germans', conditioning his selections from Tacitus and other ancient authors. In a twist of the ages-old pattern of martial valour trumping the numbers, the *ferocitas* of ancient northerners was deployed once again as a prestige- and confidence-building element of self-representation.

Abstract

This article looks at the reception, in the *Res Germanicae* of the prominent Alsatian humanist Beatus Rhenanus, of a classical assemblage of literary tropes that portrayed European barbarian groups as naturally prone to over-abundance of fertility as well as intrinsically fierce. In antiquity, the conjuncture of ideas about threatening demographic growth and natural ferocity affected deeply the way that Romans thought about their relationship with the northerners, whether 'free' groups or provincials. In Rhenanus' conception of the early Germanic history, though, the otherwise faithfully followed testimonies of ancient authors have been selectively utilized in this regard. While the motif of ferocity is put into use, the idea of European barbarians' fecundity is conspicuously avoided. Several explanations connected with Rhenanus' authorial intentions and historical context are proposed for this factor in classical reception, ranging from the role of the Ottoman threat in the Early Modern European imagination, to the preference for the notion of ancient Germanic martial *virtus* as an explanatory factor for their successes instead of their numbers. What Rhenanus' strategies of reception reveal is an open-ended negotiation with the classical inheritance during a very crucial period in the formation of the concept of Europe.

[77] This moral dimension of the German 'rediscovery' of their purported ancestral state was deeply linked with the external threat of the Turks, as in the case of Johannes Aventinus' *Ursachen des Türkenkrieges*, revised in 1529 when Vienna was under siege: Schellhase 1976, 56: 'they would be unable to take practical action against the Turk unless they first took moral action within their own hearts'.