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Tacitus on the Ancient Amber-Gatherers: A Re-Evaluation of Germania

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SPECIAL ISSUE: STUDIES IN BALTIC AMBER

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TACITUS ON THE ANCIENT AMBER-GATHERERS: A RE-EVALUATION OF GERMANIA

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Publius Cornelius Tacitus has long been regarded as the most important surviving witness of Roman culture and society of the Early Empire. His generally favorable reputation is in part attributable to a penetrating moral vision in which a bias toward the “free” institutions of the earlier Republic is evident, and in part to a highly individual prose style regarded as the finest of the “Silver Latin” period. The works on which his reputation is based have for the most part been the historical writings of his mature period—the Histories and the Annals, to use their more familiar titles. When, however, there is an attempt to examine a topic in the Germania, an earlier work classified among Tacitus’s scripta minora, one is confronted by strong prejudices among scholars against this work.

To some extent, disdain for the Germania arises from dissatisfaction with Tacitus’s methodology. It appears an accepted theory among most scholars that the Germania is comparable to other ethnographic works of antiquity and as such is to be considered “a blend of fact and legend, theory and edification.” Furthermore, whatever factual material might be found in the Germania, scholars have often assumed that it had been gleaned from Tacitus’s predecessor, Pliny the Elder, whose lost work, Bella Germaniae, is most often cited as the probable source of Tacitus’s Germania. Yet however we may choose to appraise Tacitus’s historical methods, we are dependent upon the Germania for the earliest written notice of the Aestii, an amber-gathering people located by Tacitus on the fringes of the territory of the Suebian tribes, i.e., on the southeastern shores of what we now call the Baltic Sea. Not only because of the criticism of Tacitus’s methods, but also because of recent archaeological and folklorist studies, Tacitus’s account of the Aestii stands in need of a new evaluation. The aim of this study then is twofold: to assess Tacitus’s account of the Aestii for the study of the ancient amber trade and history of the Baltic peoples, and to restore
confidence in the scholarly legitimacy of the *Germania*.

It is evident that Tacitus took great pains to acquire first-hand accounts of a particular event, for example, the death of Pliny the Elder during the eruption of Vesuvius in August, 79 A.D. This excerpt from the correspondence between Pliny the Younger, nephew of Pliny the Elder, and Tacitus shows that Pliny’s first letter was not sufficient, prompting Tacitus to request a second:

> You say that you have been prompted by the letter (which I wrote you at your request concerning the death of my uncle) to know more both of my apprehensions and of my experience when I left Misenum. I had started to tell you, but I broke off the narrative. (Pliny, *Epistles* 6.20.1 ff.)

The excerpt from Pliny’s correspondence would seem to show that Tacitus was a demanding and thoughtful researcher concerned with obtaining first-hand accounts when available. Indeed, the very nature of the material of the *Germania*—ethnography—seems to suggest the method of inserting brief ethnographical notices freely into a connected narrative. That Tacitus based his ethnography on the work of another and fleshed it out with new material drawn perhaps from merchants or soldiers is a theory put forward by several scholars. We should not conclude from this that Tacitus treated either his old or his new sources uncritically. He frequently made known his use of secondary sources and his opinion of those sources. The presence of such self-expressed commentary on his material suggests an author interested in evaluating the reliability of his sources.

What indications do we have that Tacitus offers a reliable account of the Aestii? First, we note that the beginning of chapter 45 concludes his discussion of the Suiones. Tacitus then mentions a sea located, from his southern viewpoint, on the far side of the Suiones, describing it as “sluggish, nearly immobile,” and which is believed to encircle and enclose the earth: “The brilliance of the setting sun lasts until its rising and it is so bright that it dims the stars” (*Germania* 45.1). This reference is clearly to the endless summer days of the northernmost countries. A similar account referring to northern Britain is given in *Agricola* 12.3; scholars have accused Tacitus of ignorance of the geography of northern Europe because he failed to mention the corresponding endless nights of winter mentioned by Caesar (*Bellum Gallicum* 5.13.3), Strabo (2.1.18.75, based on Hipparchus), and Pliny (*Natural History* 2.187, based on Pytheas and others). Yet if we look at the context of the remark in the *Germania*, we find a possible explanation of this curious omission. The rhetorical contrast between the falling sun, characterized by its lasting light, and the rising sun, characterized by its sound (cadentis iam solis fulgor ... sonom insuper emergentis), suggests that Tacitus sought a poetic effect here. Or he may have deliberately departed from the previous literary tradition, preferring instead to trust an eyewitness account of this phenomenon, perhaps, as has been conjectured, that of a merchant present on the Baltic littoral only in the spring and summer months.
We do not, however, need to rely on such minor or uncertain indications as this for the immediacy and accuracy of chapter 45 and of Tacitus's account of the Aestii. Directly following the reference to the endless days of summer Tacitus writes: “The popular tale is that you can hear the sound of the rising sun and that the shape of the horses and rays of the head can be seen.” (Germania 45.1). This tale in precisely this form appears nowhere else in our written sources for Greek or Latin mythology, and some have seen a reference to tales, as yet unadduced, based on the Aurora Borealis and its radiant corona. In fact, a rather precise parallel for this tale of the “noisy appearance of the sun” does exist in Baltic folk legends as captured in the daïnas, where the sun is represented as a woman who rides through the sky on horses. Commentators have obsessively seen both a male charioteer in Tacitus’s statement and a resemblance to the Greco-Roman Helios/Phaethon. Their similarity, however, consists only in their possible derivation from a common Indo-European sun god (compare for example, Saule with Vedic Surya and Savitar, who are, however, male like Helios). In one Latvian folksong the sun is depicted as driving through the gate of the sky on two horses:

Pa trešiem Saule brauca Div’dzelteniem kumeliņiem. (Through the third gate drove the sun with her two yellow horses.)

In another Latvian song, the sun and her pursuing suitors create a noise with their jangling bridles:

Vinpus jūras jātīja ĳa ĺa atskan iemauktiā (Beyond the sea they rode. Here resounded the ringing bridle.)

Recent archaeology provides evidence of the elaborate decoration of harnesses with metal by the Baltic people from the eleventh and twelfth centuries A.D., and also from as early as the “Golden Age,” shortly after the time of Tacitus’s Germania. W. Mannhardt, in his pioneering study of Baltic religion based on the folklore tradition, pointed out the relationship of Saule, the Sun Goddess, to her horses. In yet another song, the shining sun is likened to a smith whose coal is crackling:

Kas tas tāds kalējiņš Kam tik tālu ogles sprāga? Tā jau mūsu siltu saule, Savus starus mētādamā. (Who is the heavenly smith whose coal crackled so far? It is our own warm sun as she scatters her rays.)

It is evident that the Sun could be her own smith, despite the existence in Baltic mythology of a separate smith god called Kalvaitis or Kalvelis, similar to the Greek Hephaistos. Nonetheless, we have here an image of the sun’s rays associated with the sound of the rising sun. Finally, in another song (see note 18) the sunrise and the dawn are associated with the sound of a stone breaking:

Aust gaismiņa, lec saulte Pļist akmens skanēdams. (The dawn shines; the sun jumps up; the stone breaks with a loud crack.)

Thus, from a consideration of these elements from the daïnas, this character-
istically “noisy dawn,” reported somewhat skeptically by Tacitus, probably originates in local Baltic folktales and legends surviving in the form of the dainas, solid evidence that Tacitus drew on sources familiar with the Baltic littoral. One notes in connection with the last song quoted that the Latvian word for sunrise, saulekšts, is derived from Saule ‘the sun’ and lēkt ‘to jump.’ The ancient meaning of the latter is to gallop, as reflected in the extant lēksot ‘to gallop’ and lēksus ‘at a gallop.’ Once again we find a connection between sunrise and horses.

Having reached the limits of the known world, Tacitus moves on to more familiar geography, which he implies is known by 

fama vera

(verified report): “Close upon the right shore of the Suebian sea [clearly referring, from a Roman standpoint, to the eastern shore of the Baltic Sea], lie the races of the Aestii” (Germania 45.2). The plural gentes Aestiorum suggests that we are dealing with more than one distinct group. Here, as usual with the introduction of a new group, there is an attempt at classification by cultural type: “They have the customs and attire of the Suebi, but their language is closer to the Britanic” (Germania 45.2.3). Given the uninformedor nature of ancient linguistic pronouncements in general, we cannot rely on this comparison with the language of the Celtic Britons—although even if based on a superficial impression the statement is valuable. A possible explanation involves a consideration of the proximity in dates of composition of the Agricola (which concerns Tacitus’s father-in-law, appointed governor of Britain in 77 A.D.) and the writing of the Germania, which suggests that the latter work resulted from “the preliminary studies for a history of Domitian’s reign which Tacitus had planned when he wrote the Agricola in A.D. 98.” Tacitus at that time may have made extensive investigations into the language of the Britons. The simplest and most direct interpretation of Tacitus’s remark, however, is that to those in contact with the Aestii, perhaps amber traders, the language sounded different from that of the neighboring Suebic tribes and resembled in some respects the language of Celtic Britain. One similarity, for example, noted by modern linguists, between the original Baltic and Celtic tongues is the absence of the consonant shift (Grimm’s law) so characteristic of the Germanic.

Since Tacitus also used language in his attempt to classify the Pescuinians as Germans or Sarmatians, it is likely that he would have verified such information here (chapter 46.1) and in chapter 45.2. The rest of the statement in chapter 45.2.3 regarding the similarity of their dress and habits to those of the Suebi cannot by itself be used to prove any Germanic origins for the Aestii. The Suebi themselves, who are said to occupy the greater part of Germany, are described by Tacitus as a loose conglomeration of peoples (Germania 38.1 ff.). According to Tacitus, “Germany” is actually composed of distinct tribes only marginally associated. While most of the tribes have been identified as Germanic, the possible existence of a separate group, such as the Aestii, existing on their borders and posing no military threat to the Germans, seems perfectly plausible. Thus, although Tacitus locates the Aestii within the Suebi, the fluid structure of the Suebic group
as a whole—as described by Tacitus—would permit the rather loose affiliation of a linguistically and culturally distinct people such as the Aestii.

On the question of clothing in this period, archaeology provides evidence of jewelry making (fibulae and other ornaments) which, while showing regional variations, exhibit a remarkable similarity over the entire Baltic region. Furthermore, we have a considerable amount of evidence on both men’s and women’s dress of the early Iron Age from bog burials both in the Baltic region and Jutland as well as the area of the Suebic tribes. This evidence together with Roman reliefs provide remarkable confirmation of Tacitus’s statements on the peoples of this area. The loose association of the Suebic tribes comprising Germania permitted cultural communication while preserving ethnic differentiation.

Subsequent portions of chapter 45, in fact, tend to differentiate the Aestii from the neighboring Germanic peoples. According to Tacitus, the Aestii worship a mother of the gods (matrem deum venerantur, *Germania* 45.3), in stark contrast to the religious practices of most of the Germans: “They especially cherish Mercury, to whom it is permitted on certain days to make human sacrifice. Hercules and Mars, however, are satisfied by animal sacrifice” (*Germania* 9.1 ff.). It should be noted that like many nomadic peoples, the Germanic groups of this period worshipped male gods, while the Aestii, like many agricultural peoples, revered female divinities. In both *Germania* 9.1 ff. and 45.3, Tacitus employs his customary *interpretatio Romana* when discussing foreign religious practices, that is, using a Roman equivalent for a foreign deity. Most commentators have assumed that this is Tacitus’s method by citing the Phrygian “Great Mother” whose worship was introduced into Rome in 207 B.C. as the Roman equivalent of the Aestian goddess. It is interesting to note that in *Germania* 9.2.1, immediately following his discussion of the Germanic male gods, Tacitus states that “A group of the Suebi even sacrifice to Isis.” Are we to see in this tantalizingly vague reference to a portion of the Suebic peoples—possibly the Aestii—a foreshadowing of that female goddess whose worshippers among the Aestii practiced rituals further serving to differentiate them from their Germanic neighbors?

Two distinguishing features are reported by Tacitus for the worshippers of the Aestian Mother Goddess: they wear the image of the boar into battle and they use wooden clubs instead of metal weapons, even though metal is part of their technology (see below); “They revere the mother of the gods; the distinguishing mark of this religion (*superstitionis*) is the image of the boar [which] they wear” (*Germania* 45.3). This wearing of the “image” of a boar has prompted comparison with the amulets worn by the priests and worshippers of the Great Mother in Rome and a translation of *formas aorum* as “amulets” of the boar worn by the votaries of the Aestian goddess. Amber amulets carved in the shape of various animals and probably regarded as having apotropaic power are indeed witnessed in the Baltic region. This apotropaic function is clearly meant by Tacitus’s statement in reference to the *formas aorum*: “This in place of arms and any other
protection keeps the worshipper of the goddess safe even in the midst of enemies’ (Germania 45.3).

Although earlier attempts to find a Prussian-Lithuanian equivalent for Tacitus’s goddess were greeted with skepticism, more recently H. Biezais has made a strong case for an identity with a goddess of fortune named Laima.26 Common to all Baltic peoples and central to their religion, this deity survived into the Christian period, and she is even mentioned in a text by Ulenbrock, a seventeenth-century humanist from Riga: “They had, however, even goddesses [among whom a] mother of good fortune, whom they used to invoke for anything which they had to do: at home, abroad, in peace, in war, on land and sea, publicly and privately.”27 The folkloric material confirms that Laima, as a goddess of fortune and a mother figure, shows herself at the most important moments of human existence: birth, marriage, war, and death. Thus, it is logical that such a goddess’s protection would be sought by the Aestii in battle. We also note her connection with fertility and agriculture as she is said to go into the fields to sow the best wheat, or to stride over the fields, her clothes signifying the particular grain she is sowing. Furthermore, a connection with the boar is perhaps indicated by the fact that in the Alkas, or sacred fields of the Balts, boars and pigs were among those animals offered as sacrifices, as attested by excavations and historical records.28 These sacrifices would be intended to increase the fertility of the tilled fields as well as virgin lands.

Perhaps of similar significance is the discovery, at Gorodok in the remains of a round temple superimposed on an earlier one in a typical hill-sanctuary dating from the second to third century A.D., of a skull of a large male bear, apparently associated with the wooden post standing in the middle of the temple.29 What was the purpose of the wooden post and skull?

Until the twentieth century the skull of a horse or bull (or the horns alone) was believed in Lithuania to afford protection against the “evil eye,” illness in human beings or animals, hailstorms or other natural perils, and was raised on a high pole wherever the danger threatened. Until very recently, horses’ heads, horns, he-goats, rams, cocks, and other birds were used as gable decoration on rooftops.30

The wearing of the boar image by Aestian warriors may have been to ward off evil, in addition to its function as guardian and talisman in battle. Biezais also lists a great number of mother-epithets from a collection of folklore material first made by V. Greble,31 among which are: Dieva māte [god’s mother, No. 34064]; Diev’ māmiņa [little mother of god, No. 7864]; and Karā māte [mother of war, No. 13604]. These epithets, especially the last, Karā māte, remind us of Tacitus’s text. Moreover, this similarity of function indicates that Tacitus’s informant may have gotten the description of this Baltic goddess from the Balts themselves. These epithets permit a certain classification,32 and the folksongs concerning Laima indicate an underlying mother-cult, appropriate both for a people who were agricultural like Tacitus’s Aestii and for the later Balts who had such an intimate relationship to the natural world.
When we turn our attention to the second distinguishing feature of Aestian cult—their use of wooden clubs as weapons despite an advanced metallurgy (Germania, 45.4)—we find that folk tradition and historical records dating from the thirteenth century A.D. indicate that certain trees were sacred to Baltic goddesses, such as the linden tree to Laima, and possessed miraculous powers: “A stick from an ash tree, a twig from Juniper, elder, willow or southern wood [artemisia], or a green bough were regarded as effective weapons against evil spirits.” This is also noted by Mary K. Matossian in an article entitled “Vestiges of the Cult of the Mother Goddess in Baltic Folklore.” Among her examples are the Lithuanian dedication of sacred lindens to a forest goddess, Medeine, and the Latvian belief that Māra was mistress of all forest animals and trees—the linden, willow, and birch being particularly associated with the latter goddess. Thus, this information from Baltic folklore may suggest an explanation of the curious Aestian custom of using clubs (fustes) instead of iron (ferrum). The virtually exclusive use of wooden clubs at a time when the archaeological evidence shows that metal was becoming more and more available, especially among the maritime peoples described by Tacitus, would seem to defy common sense (see below, note 42). Yet an explanation may lie in the sacredness of certain trees to certain deities and the belief that such wood had apotropaic power, which might be expected to invoke the special protection of the goddess when carried in certain situations.

Before we leave our discussion of these two unique features of Aestian culture—their use of clubs and the apotropaic power of the boar amulet—let us discuss an alternative translation—“boar disguise”—for Tacitus’s phrase formas aporum. The archaeological evidence for an actual boar disguise worn in battle outweighs that for simply an amulet. We note the existence of boar disguise in the Norse, Celtic, Anglo-Saxon, Germanic, and Baltic cultures from the Bronze Age to the more modern English boar-head Christmas dinner. In all of these cultures, the boar is an important religious
The conjunction of ritual dress (the image or disguise of the boar), the carrying of possibly ritual wooden clubs, and a protecting mother-goddess suggest that the Aestii still regarded warfare as ritual combat, and that religious belief and ritual were deeply ingrained in their culture, reminding one of the religious "conservatism" and the resistance exhibited by the later inhabitants of the Baltic region to Christianity. However we may speculate on their meaning or the origin, it is certain that these important military practices are clearly distinct from those of the Germans (as described in Germania chapter 6 ff.) and the Suebic tribes (as discussed in Germania chapter 43). But neither these tribes nor any other described by Tacitus wear boar images into battle or use wooden clubs in preference to metal. For example, the Rugii and Lemovii, close neighbors of the Aestii, use metal weapons and shields (Germania 43.6).

As we progress to a more generalized description of the Aestii's way of life, we find further indications of their uniqueness. Tacitus comments on their careful husbandry: "They cultivate wheat and other fruits of the earth with more perseverance than the usually lazy Germans" (Germania 45.4.1). Archaeological finds from this period confirm the accuracy of Tacitus's remark on the level of agriculture attained by the Aestii. Gimbutas writes: "Archaeological data on the agriculture of the second and third centuries A.D. increases: finds of iron axes, hoes, sickles, and scythes ... in the graves and villages are common." Furthermore, Gimbutas argues that the Balto-Finnic tribes borrowed the Baltic word for wooden harrow. Along with this linguistic borrowing we may also assume the adoption of the implement and the activity associated with it from the Balts.

Caesar's description of the Suebi, that loosely affiliated group of peoples within which Tacitus located the Aestii, portrays this group as essentially nomadic, thereby confirming to some extent Tacitus's description of the Aestii's achievement in agriculture while also underscoring their cultural uniqueness.

These people [the Suebi] do not maintain private or separate lands among them, nor may they remain in any one place longer than a year for the purpose of cultivation. They do not live on grains to any great extent; the greatest part of their diet consists of milk and beef and a great deal of meat from hunting. (Caesar, De Bello Gallico 4.7 ff.)

All this is in stark contrast to the Aestii who patientius laborant. Thus, although we may wish Tacitus had provided us with more information on the Aestii's culture, we may still attribute to them a settled and agricultural way of life in contrast to their Germanic neighbors.

Yet agriculture and a settled way of life were not the only areas in which the Aestii, according to Tacitus, were unique: they had developed a lucrative and thriving amber trade with the Romans, although Tacitus gives the impression that the amber was of no value to the Aestii. Tacitus claims that the Aestii held a monopoly on the amber trade with the Romans when he writes: "But they [the Aestii] alone gather amber" (Germania 45.4.2).
This statement contradicts the several references in Pliny to Germanic tribes gathering and selling amber. In considering these references we find first the account of Pytheas (confirmed by Timaeus in the fourth century B.C.) describing the Gutones (Goths) living on the estuary of the river Metonomon—about a day’s sail from the island of Abalum—who sell the amber washed up by the waves to their Teutonic neighbors (Pliny, *Natural History* 37.11.42-45). To reach any accurate conclusion about Tacitus’s description of the Aestii as the sole providers of Baltic amber, one must take into account the following facts:

1. Pliny’s *Natural History* is a prodigious work of such encyclopedic scope that it is unlikely that he was able to scrutinize carefully his data.

2. Even a cursory examination of these texts shows that Pliny presented all the various accounts from the written sources at his disposal on the topic at hand, as in his account of amber as a universal phenomenon (*Natural History* 37.11.32-37.14.54).

3. Interspersed throughout his accounts are his subjective opinions on the material (e.g., *Natural History* 37.13.53).

4. Pliny’s source for the text in question is Pytheas, whose material was confirmed by his contemporary Timaeus. Both these individuals predated Tacitus by about 450 years, in which time the location of peoples and trade relationship they describe, it is safe to assume, must have changed.

5. Problems with the text itself mar the passage and make certain identification of the amber-gathering tribe even for this period (fourth to third century B.C.) questionable.

Finally, the archaeological and geological evidence points to two main sources of amber in the Baltic region. One is the estuary of the River Elbe and the western side of the Jutland peninsula, a source of the amber carried up the Elbe to Western Europe dating from at least the Bronze Age. The sources of the second amber route were the estuary of the Vistula and the shores of the southeastern Baltic. The archaeological record confirms the inference from Tacitus’s statements that by the late first to early second century A.D. the trade in amber from the western source, the area adjacent to the Elbe estuary, was greatly inferior to that originating near the estuary of the Vistula and the eastern Baltic, which reached its peak in the next century. Gimbutas writes:

A great number of coins (in burials) shows that amber was exchanged for these more than for jewelry or other items. . . . There is hardly a known cemetery in Samland or Couronia dating from the third century A.D. where Roman coins were not found. . . . Further east and north, coins and other imports are scarce. Furthermore, the preponderance of coins from the reigns of Trajan (98-117 A.D.) through Commodus (180-192 A.D.) indicates that Tacitus’s remarks describe the early stages of a trade which was developing rapidly into an extensive and profitable enterprise. The absence of any mention by Tacitus of amber-gatherers in the vicinity of the River Elbe and the
Tacitus on the Amber-Gatherers

dwindling of the amber trade from that region may be somehow related
to the retreat of the Roman frontier to the middle of the Rhine and the upper
Danube in the time of the Emperors Vespasian and Domitian in the second
half of the first century A.D., as well as to Aestian industriousness.47

Tacitus further states that the Aestii called amber glēsum (Germania
45.5). This is his only specific reference, other than the name Aestii itself,
to their language. However, according to Pliny (Natural History 37.11.43),
the word glaesum—note the spelling—is also the German word for amber,
and the “reason the Romans, when Germanicus Caesar [15 B.C.-19 A.D.]
commanded the fleet in those parts, gave to one of the islands the name
of Glaesaria.” To some this is evidence that the Aestii spoke a Germanic
language and were, in fact, a Germanic people. Disregarding the previously
discussed characteristics by which the Aestii differ in material culture from
their Germanic neighbors the Suebi, we find that even the linguistic evidence
is not so clear. The original sense of the word may be preserved in
the modern Latgalian dialectal gleze, where it refers to a sticky resin.48 It
would appear that the word has a history in the Baltic languages and
literatures: was it originally borrowed from those early German amber-
gatherers mentioned by Pliny, or is the word a later Germanic version of
a Baltic word? Is there a common origin? When the word appears in the
dainas, it already shows a development parallel to that in the Germanic
languages—now meaning “glass” or a vitreous substance:

Danci, danci kumeliņ ozoliņa stallīti! Glāzi logī, zelta durvis sudrabiņa
redelītes.49
(Dance, dance horse in the oakwood stable! Glass windows, golden doors,
silver crib.)

The modern Latvian glāze refers to a glass drinking vessel, while the
Latvian for window glass is indeed a different word (stikls), possibly
borrowed from the Slavic (cf. Russian steklo). However we may regard
linguistic evidence as a means of ethnic classification, its inconclusiveness
here raises doubts as to its ability to persuade one that the Aestii were
a Germanic group.

The statement in Germania 45.5 that the Aestii collect amber between
the shoals and on the shore itself is an example of that concreteness of detail
which marks the rest of the account in this work. Similarities to the
vocabulary in Pliny (Natural History 37.11.42 ff.) may indicate that Tacitus
used Pliny’s account to some extent. Tacitus, however, leaves out the detail
about the buoyancy of amber, and his statement in Germania 45.5.5 (“it
lay amidst the other jetsam of the sea”) is a stylistic improvement over
Pliny’s: “It is brought there by the waves throughout the spring and it is
the flux of the stagnant sea” (Natural History 37.11.51).

A general comparison reveals that Tacitus shows more of an interest
in the amber-gatherers whereas Pliny is more interested in the amber itself.
Thus, Tacitus is concerned with the Aestii’s attitude towards amber: “For
a long time it lay amidst the other jetsam of the sea until our extravagance
gave it a name” (Germania 45.5.3). This statement appears at first glance to be contradicted by the archaeological record. Trade in Baltic amber since the seventeenth/sixteenth century B.C. has been confirmed by amber finds in the Unetician culture in central Europe, in Middle and Late Helladic Greece, and by hoards of bronze objects found in Baltic graves; yet in general sense Tacitus is correct. At the time of Tacitus’s writing, the Balts were on the verge of their “Golden Age” (second to the fifth century A.D.), the period of the greatest export of amber, as witnessed by the fact that amber was replaced by Roman bronze coins in the Aestii burials. Gimbutas writes:

It is of interest to note that amber beads were extremely rare in the land of amber; they appear in greatest number outside the source-area. To the amber-gatherers the substance was apparently so common that they yearned for more exotic ornaments. In the villages of Samland amber is usually found in raw or half-finished condition.51

Gimbutas’s survey of the evidence confirms Tacitus’s statement (Germania 45.5.4) that amber had become of so little value that “they themselves have no use for it,” and that it is gathered in a raw state and traded unworked. Moreover, according to Germania 45.5.6, the Aestii appear amazed at the exorbitant prices which this commodity commands (pretium mirantes accipiant). Regrettably, it is at this point—Germania 45.6—that Tacitus continues on to a detailed analysis of the nature and origin of amber itself, ending his discussion of the Aestii.

In sum, Tacitus’s reluctance to identify the Aestii with the Germanic Suebians appears to be correct. His sources, even though apparently oral, appear to have been reliable although he does record material which he himself regarded skeptically, as with the legend of the “noisy dawn” or the wearing of the boar disguise. Most importantly, the archaeological record provides evidence of an indigenous culture which had been developing continuously in the eastern Baltic area long before Tacitus’s time and which, as he implies, was influencing and being influenced by surrounding cultures. Unfortunately, Tacitus’s interest seems to have been focused on the maritime members of this culture; certain groups to the east and south which we now know were related to this people are not acknowledged. In addition, evidence from Pliny’s extant writings does not indicate that he had any greater or more accurate knowledge of the northern peoples or geography than did Tacitus, nor does the evidence indicate that Tacitus would have accepted Pliny’s writings uncritically. Perhaps the most significant and unique general feature of Tacitus’s account is that “the separate units of people, tribes and nations are no longer merely a string of proper names, but to him they have already become individual ethничal and cultural entities.”52
NOTES

1. I would like to thank Dr. Nicholas Boyer, my colleague at the Sixth Conference on Baltic Studies, Toronto 1978 (at which portions of this paper were delivered) for his generous help with translation and guidance with the linguistic material from the Baltic languages, and Dr. Joan Todd for her unwavering support in the preparation and publication of this paper. The Latin text of the Germania used in the discussion which follows is that of H. Furneaux for the Oxford Classical Text Series, Clarendon, 1899. The Latin text of Pliny's Natural History is that of the Loeb Classical Library edited by H. Rackham (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1900). The Latin text of Julius Caesar's De Bello Gallico is that of F. Kramer (Leipzig: Teubner, 1890).

2. J. Wight Duff, A Literary History of Rome, 2 vols. (London: E. Benn, 1964), II, 447: "Concerning P. Cornelius Tacitus, ... there is no dearth of problems to awake interest, though they do not affect his unchallenged mastery of one of the most wonderful styles in literature."


4. Syme, 126.


8. Germania 44.1 ff.: "Suionum hinc civitates ipso in oceano, praeter viros armaque classibus valent." (Here on the very shore of ocean are the states of the Suiones, a people secure in their fleet, men, and weapons.)

9. Cf. R. Much, ed., Die Germania des Tacitus (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1959), 404, for parallel descriptions of this sea. His notes on the geographical orientation of Tacitus's account are excellent.

10. See Anderson, notes on Germania 45.2.

11. "Sonum insuper emergentis audire formasque et radios capitis adspici persuasio adicit." According to Syme, 718, this is the only occurrence of the word persuasio in the Germania. Anderson notes, in reference to Germania 45.1, that in contrast with fides and vera fama elsewhere this word reveals a lack of credence on Tacitus's part.

12. See Anderson, 208: "The popular belief that the setting sun made a hissing sound as it dropped into the ocean... is first mentioned by Epicurus and later by many writers, e.g., Juvenal (14.280): but no other classical writer connects the belief with the rising sun."

13. Dr. Nicholas Boyer has kindly assisted me in finding the relevant texts and with their translation.


17 W. Mannhardt, "Die Lettische Sonnenmythen," Zeitschrift für Ethnologie, 7 (1985), 93 ff. The connection with farming is also indicated on pp. 74-75, where he states that the farmer’s life was regulated by prayers to Saule at sunrise and sunset.

18 Švābe, et al., II, 358 (No. 33729-229-1) and III, vi.


20 Ptolemy (c. 100-178 A.D.) knew of “Soudinoi” and “Galindai” which are later attested to be names of Prussian tribes. Cf. A. Spekke, The Ancient Amber Routes and the Geographical Discovery of the Eastern Baltic (Stockholm: M. Gappers, 1957), 91. This proves, according to Spekke, the connection of the old Prussian tribes with the amber trade. So, too, Gimbutas, 21-22.

21 Anderson, xiii.


23 Gimbutas, 123-37.


25 Spekke, 5, fig. 2, provides an example (following E. Sturms) of an amber boar figurine from Danzig. However, it is important to note that the other animals are equally represented.


27 Encomium Urbis Rigaiae Lacioniae Emporii Celeberrimi (Rostock, 1615), 140, as cited in Ström and Biezais, 356.

28 Gimbutas, 193.

29 Ibid., 182-83.

30 Ibid.

31 Ström and Biezais, 368.

32 Ibid., 369-70.

33 Gimbutas, 194.

34 In Baltic Literature and Linguistics, ed. A. Ziedonis, Jr., et al. (Columbus, Ohio: AABS, 1973), 119-25.

35 By coincidence, the Romans used the fustis in what was probably a survival of a ritual practice, namely the fusturium, the beating to death with clubs as a military punishment.

36 A wooden club was discovered at Foerlev Nymolle in 1961 by H. Anderson, cited by Glob, 180.

37 A convenient collection of material is found in P. Gelling and H. E. Davidson, The Chariot of the Sun and Other Rites and Symbols of the Northern Bronze Age (London: Praeger, 1969), 164-66. See also Much, 404.

38 Gelling and Davidson, 38-39.

39 The Vanir are regarded as the divine ancestors of the Swedish kings.

40 Gelling and Davidson, 165.

41 A deeper explanation of Aestian battle practices may lie in hunting magic, which ultimately predates the "Neolithic Revolution" or development of agriculture. We have already noted that boar’s head rituals occur in many cultures other than the Baltic, leading us to the supposition that it dates to a time prior to that of clearly recognizable cultural entities. Cultural uniformity is a feature of Paleolithic culture. Furthermore, the earliest examples of warriors dressed in animal guise are the Scandinavian rock carvings dating from the Early Bronze Age. The hunting of the wild boar had special significance from earliest times, as evidenced in the number of myths concerning a young hunter killed by a boar, such as Adonis, Ancaeus,
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Adrastus, and Atys in Greek mythology. To one familiar with Greco-Roman mythology, the mention of a club in association with animal disguise suggests the Greek hero Heracles, represented most familiarly with lion-skin and club. In one version of the myth of how he acquired the lion-skin, in which he dispatches the lion of Cithaeron, he uses an untrimmed club cut from a wild-olive tree, dresses himself in the lion pelt, and wears the gaping jaws as a helmet (Theocritus, Idyll 25). The description of the club in Theocritus clearly indicates its ritual nature. In addition, one of the twelve labors performed by Heracles for King Eurystheus was the capture of a live boar who lived on the slopes of Mt. Eurymanthus, a mountain sacred to Artemis (Apollodorus 2.5.4 and other mythographers). Neolithic rock paintings and later archaic stelae depicting a three-horned man or men fighting monsters or wild stags and cattle have been associated recently with Heracles and such labors as the Eurymanthian boar, the Ceryneian hind, the return of the cattle to three-headed Geryon; in fact, the whole cycle of "labors" may be plausibly traced back to shamanistic hunting magic which is no doubt a feature of Paleolithic hunting-gathering societies. See W. Burkert, Structure and History in Greek Mythology (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1979), 78-98. The purpose of the shaman's actions often involves disguise and journey to a world beyond so that he may secure the success of the hunt and gain power over the animals, who in many mythologies and traditions are described as under the influence of the mistress of wild beasts. In Greek myth and ritual the familiar potnia theron is sometimes called Artemis. We have noted the evidence of the Lithuanian dedication of sacred lindens to a forest goddess, Medeine, and the Latvian belief that Mära was a mistress of all forest animals and trees. These goddesses share characteristics with the mother goddess, Laima, and probably originate in one great mother goddess. The Aestii's preference, therefore, for a wooden club may ultimately be the result of the use of wooden clubs in shamanistic ritual and a belief in the extraordinary power which the club conferred upon the bearer, as in the case of Heracles and the shamanistic figures who lie behind him.

42 Gimbutas, 114.
43 Ibid.
44 For a more exact description of amber sites in this area, see Gimbutas, 56-57 and figs. 8 and 36.
46 Ibid.
47 Cf. Spekke, 88.
48 I owe this reference to Dr. Nicholas Boyer.
49 Švabě, et al., 1, 45 (No. 29654-69).
50 Gimbutas, 56-57.
51 Ibid., 129.
52 Spekke, 88.