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The Idea of North

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[1] The idea of the North in Western society has a long and distinguished history. Indeed, the only 'purely ethnographic treatise that survives from antiquity' is Tacitus's *Germania*, his description of the Germanic peoples (Mellor 1993: 14). Tacitus produced his short treatise as a way of forcing Romans to confront the luxurious decadence that he felt had enveloped and deformed their society. The *Germania* was a companion piece to the *Agricola*, the life of the military leader, his father-in-law, Cornelius Julius Agricola, governor of Britain and 'one of the most successful generals of the Flavian era' (Mellor 1993: 10). Tacitus was also eager to contrast the hard liberties enjoyed by the barbarian tribes of the north to the soft yoke of servility that the Romans had experienced under the tyranny of Nero, as well as the abstemiousness and carefully regulated sexuality of the Germans and Britons to the disgraceful over-indulgence of the Romans. The North might be primitive and unsophisticated, but it had retained a humanity that the South was in danger of losing.

[2] Tacitus's two important treatises, vital as sources for our knowledge of the life of the Anglo-Saxons, represent a people who know their limits and stick to them. Tacitus grants fulsome praise to the marriage customs of the Germans:

Yet matrimonie is seuerely kept among them: the thing most commendable, of all their manner of life: for of all barbarous people, they alone consent themselues, euery man with one wife, except some very few: which not for vnruely lust, but for their nobilitie are sued unto for sundrie marriages. The wife giues not a dowry to her husband, but the husband to the wife. Their parents and neere kinsmen are present, when they giue any gifts the one to the other: which are not exquisite as to dantie dames, or for to beautifie and trim the new married wife: but oxen, and a horse with furniture, and a shield with a sword, and lance. With these gifts the wife is taken, and she also doth bring her husband some armes: this is the greatest bond: these are the secret ceremonies: these they thinke to be the gods of marriage. And least the woman should thinke her selfe exempt and free from bonds of virtue, or hazards of warre in the very beginnings and first speech of marriage, she is put in minde, that she commeth as a companion of his labours and dangers: and that she shall suffer and venture the same in peace and warre that he doth (Tacitus, trans. Richard Grenewey 1598: 263).

Tacitus's instructive and leading contrasts establish a series of oppositions that were to be exploited and explored by numerous subsequent commentators, especially those interested in that most important of republican concepts, virtue. The Germans are heroic and noble because they live a hard life deprived of luxuries, obviously in pointed contrast to the spoilt and easy-living Romans. Marriage is the cornerstone of German society, an institution that forces those who accept its rules to understand its essentially egalitarian character. Marriage gifts centre around the need for the couple to survive and protect themselves, not to indulge their appetites and vanity. Women are respected as equals, and so have to endure the hardships of life alongside their husbands. In these ways the true value of marriage is established and accepted by the Germans. They regulate their bodies in order to create the building blocks of a society under siege, understanding the 'bonds of virtue' and the demands that are placed upon the individual.

[3] The qualities of the Germans are mirrored by those of their noble opponents. Tacitus represents Agricola as a moderate and well-regulated man, another pointed contrast to the

excesses of the Southerners, who seek to undermine his campaign and negate his virtue:

Now to the ende hee might temper and qualifie with other good parts his militarie renowne, a virtue vnpleasant to men of no action, hee gaue himselfe wholly to quietnesse and meddling with nothing, being in apparel moderate, affable in speech, accompanied vsually but by one or two of his frendes: so that many, which commonly judge of great men by the outwarde apparence and pompe, seeing and marking Agricola, missed of that which by fame they conceyued, fewe aimed aright at the cause. Often was hee in those dayes accused to Domitian in absence, and in absence acquitted. The cause was neither matter of crime, nor complaint of partie aggriued, but the renowne of the man, and the Princes disposition hating all virtue, and of the most capitall kinde of enemies commenders, procured the perill (Tacitus, trans. Henry Saville 1591: 263).

Agricola may be employed to fight the Northern barbarians by the Romans, but he resembles them more closely than he does his political masters. Like them, he exhibits an impressive self-control, is loath to show off, has disciplined tastes and appetites, and values friendship and loyalty above more obvious routes to self-advancement. Tacitus has mounted a forceful political critique of the Roman Empire in these two complementary books, one that is more direct and confrontational than the subtle political analysis of his *Annals and Histories*. These works were read as guides to political behaviour, justifying suspicion of sudden change and a belief that quietism was invariably the best policy, as well as a critique of the corruption of the powerful (Burke 1969: 149-71). It is not quite as easy to extract the same message from the *Agricola* and the *Germania*, as their purpose is to remind their readers of what Rome lost when the Republic was overthrown. The Republic was based on the idea of a shared understanding of virtue, public and private spheres reinforcing the common values of restraint, liberty and equality (cf. Skinner 1998). As Rome was overwhelmed by corruption in the last years of the Republic, the idea of virtue retreated from the open public arenas into more personal and private spaces so that, for Cicero, the last great defender of the Republic, virtue had become equated with friendship. Now, for Tacitus, Rome had so degenerated under the tyrannies of Nero and Domitian that virtue was something that had to be learned from Rome's enemies, the Northern barbarian hordes. They could teach Romans about proper morality and its relationship to equality, showing how liberty needed to be tried, tested and under constant assault for it to be properly valued and to thrive. The only area in which Roman virtue was actually flourishing was in the army, where moderation and good sense prevailed. However, such virtue placed it at odds with the corrupt leaders of Roman society who could not tolerate the exposure of their own vices. In order to defend themselves they were prepared to let Rome sink even lower.

[4] Tacitus has established a powerful model of ethnographic and political analysis, one that had a profound influence on subsequent European thought. The distinction between the sophisticated and decadent South and the hard, virtuous North, a geographical division that had an obviously sexualised element that could be activated almost at will, became a central feature of Europe's understanding of itself. The idea that political virtue, especially Republicanism, had either originated in or travelled to the North was also a key element of debates about politics and society in medieval and early modern Europe. What did societies gain and lose as they became more sophisticated? Did they need to learn from their supposedly more primitive neighbours as well as those with obvious superiorities in art, literature and culture? As the English translations of Tacitus suggest, these texts posed particular questions for an English audience uncertain of its national identity and place within the pantheon of nations (Porter and Teich 1992). Should England look North or South for inspiration?

[5] In exploring the answer to this question English readers turned to a number of compendious histories written in Latin, which functioned within the ethnographical paradigm established by Tacitus. Saxo Grammaticus's *The History of the Danes* was widely available in Europe throughout the early modern period and was the source not just of Danish history, but one of the key works that established the identity of the Northern European nations. Saxo's *History*, probably composed between 1208 and 1218, is most famous as the obvious source of *Hamlet*, and, although it is possible that Shakespeare obtained the story of the terrible dilemma of Amleth via François Belleforest's adaptation in *Histories Tragiques* (1564-82), it is more likely that he consulted the original, especially given his taste for lengthy historical works (Bullough 1957-75: vol. VII, 3-79).[1] For other English readers the miscellaneous nature of the *History*, especially in its early books which relate the myths, legends and historical fragments of Denmark, Sweden, Norway and Iceland, made it a 'treasure-trove' of stories, allusions and episodes (Saxo 1979-80: II. 2).

[6] In his preface Saxo represents Denmark as a dangerous land once inhabited by 'a civilisation of giants', a history that links his country to Britain (Saxo 1979-80: I. 9). In the most popular history of British origins, another Medieval Latin text readily available for sixteenth-century readers, Geoffrey of Monmouth describes Britain before the arrival of the eponymous Brutus as an island called Albion 'uninhabited except for a few giants', the largest and most savage of which is the 'repulsive' Gogmagog, 'who was twelve feet tall' (72-3). Corineus, the founder of Cornwall, defeats and kills Gogmagog, throwing him from a cliff onto the rocks, a place now known as Gogmagog's Leap. Saxo represents Denmark as a land that requires equally brave and intrepid explorers, because

Such creatures [giants]...are today supposed to inhabit the rugged, inaccessible waste-land...and be endowed with transmutable bodies, so that they have the incredible power of appearing and disappearing, of being present and suddenly somewhere else. But entry to that land is beset with perils so horrific that a safe home-coming is seldom granted to those who adventure it (Saxo 1979-80: I. 9).

Denmark stands as a land that needs to be conquered and inhabited by heroes, a part of the North to be brought into the ambit of the civilized world, as Britain was many years before, or, as Saxo clearly implies, like the lands colonized by the Vikings and Norsemen represented in the sagas and chronicles (one of Saxo's key points of comparison is *Hrolf's Saga Kraka*, a legendary saga which narrates the history of the adventures of Hrólf Kraki and his clan, the Skjöldungs, in the fifth and sixth centuries ('King Hrolf' 1961: 221-318)). Denmark is a land of magic and witches, supernatural forces that invariably threaten human attempts to establish normal life. Saxo emphasizes the hostile nature of the elements that conspire against mankind in his preface:

There is a story...of certain men who happened to be running across an ice-field when they pitched up into the depths of gaping crevasses which appeared before them; shortly afterwards they were discovered lifeless and not the merest chink remained in the ice... Rumour has it that whoever sips at a certain unwholesome fountain which gushes there falls dead as if he had drunk poison. Other springs are said to have the quality of ale. There are kinds of fire too which, though unable to harm wood, may consume a fluid such as water (Saxo 1979-80: I. 8)

If the ale spring is left to one side, the details depict a nature that actively resists civilization and forces men and women to confront the dark, ancient forces of the pre-Christian pagan world.

[7] In having to combat the dangerous twilight supernatural world the peoples of the North have to be more heroic than their more civilized counterparts. As in Tacitus, the barbarians are especially hardy, generally immune to sexual vice, and enjoy equal marriages with women who possess their fair share of masculine qualities. Vithserk, king of Scythia, agrees

to be burned alive with his warriors after he has been treacherously defeated by Daxon, rather than accept the tainted freedom offered to him by the victor. His father, the great Danish hero, Regner, has to be reminded of his duties by his wife:

When he heard the news, Regner in his grief was set on dying, for he not only went into mourning, but, with a heart completely stricken, confined himself to his bed and let groans reveal the sorrow he had suffered. His wife, whose self-reliance surpassed a man's, chided Regner's feebleness and fortified him with her masculine exhortations; she summoned his soul from its dejection, told him he must resort to energetic warfare and declared that a courageous father made better amends to a son's bloodstained ashes through arms than tears. Further, she advised him not to whimper like a woman, for he would reap as much dishonour through weeping as he had previously gained glory by his valour. Her words made Regner fear he might obliterate his ancient renown for bravery by effeminate lamentation; he therefore threw off his sad demeanour and the outward marks of misery, and allowed the hope of a swift revenge to revive his dormant hardiness. So at times stout dispositions are strengthened by weaker ones (Saxo 1979-80: I. 289).

In the heroic world of the frozen North there is no time for excessive, emasculating grief. Immediate action is required as shows of weakness will lead to disaster. The dilemma that Regner faces resembles that of Amleth, who has to avenge the murder of his father, Orvendil, by his uncle, Fengi, who then marries his mother, Gerutha. Amleth, realising what has taken place through his own natural intelligence, feigns madness and bides his time. The opportunity for revenge arises at a feast. Amleth encourages the Danish warriors to indulge in excessive drinking, then wraps them securely inside a tapestry woven by Gerutha. Taking out the sticks he has prepared for this moment, he burns the palace down, cremating the inhabitants. Finally he confronts Fengi with his knowledge in the usuper's bed chamber, and kills him with his own sword.

[8] The story is much more straightforward than Shakespeare's version, and Amleth succeeds to the throne, becoming a powerful king, and outwitting and killing the treacherous British king before perishing in battle. What is notable is Saxo's unrestrained praise for Amleth's heroic deeds:

What a brave man this Amleth was, worthy of everlasting fame! He wisely fortified himself by an incredible performance of stupidity, submerging under it a brilliant reason transcending mortal faculties; thus his wits provided him with a safe-conduct and kept him alive until he reached the moment for revenging his father. Considering the skill with which he preserved himself and the energy with which he exacted atonement, one can hardly decide which to extol more, his courage or his wisdom (Saxo 1979-80: I. 90).

There is no criticism of Amleth's actions, simply a recognition that cunning and ruthlessness have to be exhibited by true leaders in the heroic world of the North. Amleth's qualities are exhibited in other contemporary descriptions of successful rulers. Geoffrey of Monmouth's account of Arthur, the first extended description of the legendary British king, sees Arthur discover that mercy is a dangerous quality in brutal times. Arthur defeats the Saxon invaders and allows them to leave for home. When they return, having 'repented of the bargain which they had made', he learns quickly, ordering 'summary justice to be inflicted upon their hostages, who were all hanged without more ado' (Geoffrey 1966: 215, 216). Arthur then defeats them again. Most kings, we realise, would not have been so lucky.

[9] The story of Amleth continues in Book Four as the new king tells the Danes that he has restored their liberty, casting off his pretend lunacy and revealing that he has always been in control. The speech is probably derived not simply from Scandinavian sources, but also

from Brutus's speech revealing the treachery of Tarquin and the need for a republic after the suicide of Lucrece, as outlined in Livy or Valerius Maximus. Amleth describes himself as

An agent of righteous revenge striving to fulfil my responsibility...Lamenting the violence to my father and fatherland, I wiped out the wretch who fiercely lorded it over you in a way men should not have to bear. Acknowledge a service, do honour to my abilities and grant me the kingdom if I have earned it; you see here the dispenser of this favour, no killer nor degenerate heir to his father's power, but the lawful inheritor of the realm and dutiful avenger of fratricide. To me you owe the restoration of liberty, the abolition of the tormentor's rule, the removal of the oppressor's yoke, the murderer's authority shaken off and the tyrant's sceptre trampled underfoot. It is I who have stripped you of slavery and dressed you in freedom, set you back on the heights, repaired your renown, evicted the despot, triumphed over a hangman. The prize is in your hands. Since you know my merits, I ask you, out of your goodness, to bestow the reward (Saxo 1979-80: I. 96).

Amleth's assessment of the situation in Denmark corresponds exactly to that in Rome after the banishment of the Tarquins. Livy argues that 'The hard-won liberty of Rome was rendered the more welcome, and the more fruitful, by the character of the last king, Tarquin the Proud', which is how Amleth represents the situation to the Danes (89). Brutus then assumes power in order to prevent liberty spreading too quickly and leading to chaos, again, a course of action that Amleth imitates by assuming the kingship. If such parallels can be substantiated—and it seems likely that they can—then Saxo is showing that the republican spirit that used to characterise Rome is now the preserve of the North. The tradition of republican liberty preserved by an elective kingship—a notable feature of Denmark, but also countries such as Scotland (see below)—developed independently. As that tradition has clearly declined in the South, it must be kept alive in the North, which would appear to be one of the key messages of Saxo's *History*. Liberty can only be preserved through a constant struggle, as it is easy to become complacent and succumb to luxurious tyranny.

[10] The battle between the two forces is played out by many of the kings who come after Amleth as Denmark teeters between liberty and tyranny. The struggle is especially marked in Book 6, which narrates the kingdom ruled by the kings who succeed Frothi III, culminating in the great warhorse, Starkather, whose reign enables Saxo to 'introduce biting satire about the corruption of the Danish court under Saxon influence' (Saxo 1979-80: II. 160). Frothi III's grandson, Frothi IV, is an exemplary monarch, because 'He did not expose himself to the vulgar lures of vice, as despots commonly will'. Instead he makes sure that his wealth is always on show in the public domain, and he tries to 'overcome envy by his virtue' (Saxo 1979-80: I. 170). Unfortunately he is succeeded by his son, Ingel, who 'With a mind set askew from virtue', abandoned the 'patterns of his forbears and surrendered himself wholly to the baits of wanton extravagance'. While Frothi was a model of republican virtue and restraint, Ingel becomes the epitome of tyrannical vice and excess:

At variance with all that was good and upright, he grasped at vice instead of sound morality, severed the cords of restraint, neglected a sovereign's duties and became a vile slave to riotous living. Any disorderliness or impropriety he cultivated to perfection.... So addicted was he to gluttony that he saw no point in discretion or moderation when catering for the appetite and had no desire to avenge his father or repel foes' aggressions. He vitiated his noble lineage in sloth and idleness by leading the dissolute life of a voluptuary and his degenerate soul strayed along a crooked route far from the tracks of his forefathers, delighting to plunge into the most disgusting pits of filthiness (Saxo 1979-80: I. 175).

The story is the same as that of Rome, and it is hard to imagine that Saxo has not modelled his narrative on a work such as Tacitus's *Annals*, making the link between Tacitus's representation of the Britons and Germans and the history of Rome, a connection made by Tacitus himself. The advent of the Republic saw the establishment of virtue in place of the tyrannous vice of the Tarquins, who over-reached themselves with the rape of Lucrece. The end of the Republic, its institutions declining steadily throughout its final years, as Polybius demonstrated in his *History*, led to the re-establishment of tyrannous vice. Augustus, for Tacitus, was a mixture of virtue and vice, not without a great personal integrity, but unable to control the dark forces that had been unleashed by the return of unfettered monarchy (Eck 2003). But he was succeeded by the Julio-Claudians, and three notorious tyrants, Tiberius, Caligula and Nero, the level of vice increasing until the emperor fiddled while his city burned.[2]

[11] This historical process has been replicated in the North, as the history of Denmark demonstrates. After the hard masculine virtue of Frothi we have the effeminate vice of Ingel, who panders to his every whim, as Saxo makes explicit with a clear relish for every damning detail:

His idea of greatness was to collect fatteners for fowls, scullions, frying-pans, all kinds of roasting and spicing meats. He could not bear to learn familiarity with arms, soldiering and warfare nor let others train for such exercises. Casting aside masculine enthusiasms, he emulated those of a woman, for his unbridled itch for guzzling was aroused by every aroma from the kitchen. Without a shred of sobriety he would always be exhaling the fumes of his last drinking orgy and with stinking breath belching out the ill-digested impurities of his stomach. His excesses were as sickening as Frothi's military exploits had been glorious (Saxo 1979-80: I. 175).

Saxo employs the familiar dichotomy between masculine reason and its counterpart, restraint, based on the mind, and feminine sensuality, rooted in the body (McLean 1980; Schoenfeldt 1999: 35-7). Clearly such behaviour cannot continue in the heroic world and indeed help is at hand for Denmark in the form of the mighty hero, Starkather, 'who loathed his [Ingel's] debauches', and so left for Sweden, 'preferring work to ease' (Saxo 1979-80: I. 175-6). In plotting his revenge, a protracted series of actions against everyone who has brought Denmark low, Starkather learns to let 'Reason rule... his anger and check... his fury from bursting out' (Saxo 1979-80: I. 176). The wheel has turned again as Starkather, in disguise, starts to follow the path that Amleth took, eventually returning Denmark to a more virtuous—albeit more bloody—state.

[12] Such heroic masculine violence was not, of course, confined to the history of the North. The identical process is replicated in Christopher Marlowe's *Tamburlaine the Great, part two* (published 1590), in which the harsh military virtue of the hero leads to the soft effeminacy of his son, Calyphas, who wishes to enjoy the fruits of his father's labours. While the battle rages, Calyphas and his servant, Perdicas, indulge themselves and, in doing so, reveal to the audience how they envisage the world and their place within it:

Calyphas: Come, thou and I will go to cards to drive away the time.

Perdicas: Content, my lord: but what shall we play for?

Calyphas: Who shall kiss the fairest of the Turks' concubines first, when my father hath conquered them.

Perdicas: Agreed, I'faith.

Calyphas: They say I am a coward, Perdicas, and I fear as little their tarantaras [trumpet calls], their swords, or their cannons as I do a naked lady in a net of gold, and, for fear I should be afraid, would put it off and come to bed with me.

Perdicas: Such a fear, my lord, would never make me retire.

Calyphas: I would my father would let me be put in the front of such a battle once, to try my valour. (IV.ii.61-75)

Calyphas wants to fight pretend battles with bare ladies, rather than see real military action. In many ways his self-indulgence comes as a welcome comic contrast to the brutality of the world his father inhabits, his silly jokes and banter with Perdicas a relief from the rolling thunder of Tamburlaine's imposing mighty lines. The irony is that the self-enclosed world that Calyphas and Perdicas inhabit depends on the violence that Tamburlaine inflicts upon others. They live off his labour, expecting to harvest the concubines that he captures without working to earn their pleasures. Needless to say, it all ends in tears, when Tamburlaine duly stabs his errant son *pour encourager les autres*. Marlowe emphasises the point in the subsequent scene, which shows the noble fortitude of Olympias, widow of Captain of Balsara, who effectively commits suicide by persuading Theridamas that she has a special ointment that can repel a sword, anointing her throat, and encouraging him to try and stab her. These scenes, largely comic in design, I suspect, reverse expected gender characteristics and roles, juxtaposing the Stoic woman—like Portia in *Julius Caesar*—and the effeminate man.[3]

[13] Tamburlaine is a Scythian, a member of another barbarian people most influentially described by Herodotus, who inhabited the vast open spaces of Asia Minor north of Greece, and were represented in similar terms to the peoples of the North: fierce, loyal, brutal, hardy and virtuous (Herodotus 1972: 271-89, *passim*). For Herodotus and other Greek authors, the Scythian lifestyle was an instructive contrast to that of the Greeks, and the barbarians could remind their more civilised neighbours of the fundamental virtues they were in danger of neglecting. Lucian's dialogue, *Toxaris*, shows the Scythian, Toxaris, in conversation with Mnesippus, a Greek, as they debate the respective virtues of each race and the societies in which they live. The Scythians, as might be expected, are shown to value particularly masculine virtues: military prowess, especially archery (as the title of the dialogue indicates), resilience in the face of adversity, openness and honesty, proper respect for the dead, and friendship, seen in an especially male way:

Now, now, Mnesippus, listen to me, and you shall see how much more candid we barbarians are in our valuation of good men than you Greeks. In Argos and Mycenae there is not so much as a respectable tomb raised to Orestes and Pylades: in Scythia, they have their temple, which is very appropriately dedicated to the two friends in common, their sacrifices, and every honour. The fact of their being foreigners does not prevent us from recognizing their virtues. We do not inquire into the nationality of noble souls: we can hear without envy of the illustrious deeds of our enemies; we do justice to their merits, and count them Scythians in deed if not in name. What particularly excites our reverent admiration in the present case is the unparalleled loyalty of the two friends; in them we have a model from which every man may learn how he must share good and evil fortune with his friends, if he would enjoy the esteem of all good Scythians (Lucian 1905: III. 38).

The Scythian reminds the Greek that virtue should come first, ahead of issues of race and nation. The Scythians are able to absorb other peoples as long as they exhibit the qualities that everyone admires and values. Yet again, it is easy to see how the emphasis on friendship can be mapped onto an understanding of republican virtue and the ways in which the noble barbarian peoples have much to teach the effete civilisations that have lost their way through a plethora of the good things that the world has to provide. It is important

to note that Edmund Spenser in his harsh military dialogue, *A View of the Present State of Ireland* (c.1596), has Irenius state that the Irish are descended from the Scythians, using *Toxaris* as evidence because it reveals that both peoples share similar traits and characteristics. Spenser's representation of the Irish is notorious, as is his argument for aggressive military intervention to solve the problem.[4] However, the passage that refers the reader to Lucian's dialogue opens up the possibility of a narrative of reconciliation, reminding the reader that the savage peoples – especially the peoples of the North – have more admirable qualities that adjacent civilised nations need to heed. Irenius transports the reader from a tale of savage customs to a commentary on republican/democratic political practices:

Allsoe the *Scythians* vsed when they would binde together vowinge thearby to spende theire laste blood in that quarrell, And even so do the wilde Scottes as ye maie reade in *Buchanan* and some of the Northern Irishe likewise. ye maye also reade in the same booke in the tale of *Arsacomus* that it was the manner of the *Scythians* when anie one of them | was heaviely wronged and woulde assemble vnto him anye forces of people to ioyne with him in his revenge to sitt in publique place for certaine daies vppon an oxehide to whiche theare woulde resorte all suche personnes as beinge disposed to take armes woulde enter into his paie or ioyne with him in his quarrell And the same ye maye likewise reade to haue bene the Anciente manner of the wilde Scottes which are indede the verry naturall Irishe, moreouer the *Scythians* vsed to sweare by their kinges hande as *Olaus* shewethe And so do the Irishe vse now to sweare by their Lordes hande and to forswear it houlde it more Cryminall then to sweare by god (Spenser 1949: 108-9).[5]

Irenius's claim is that the Irish are descended from the Scythians because they both exhibit similar traits and characteristics. It is hard to state exactly how seriously this argument is proposed, but it is clear enough that the Irish are represented as a people who are Scythian in nature. Like the Scythians, the Irish are savage blood drinkers. Herodotus states that 'the Scythian custom [in war] is for every man to drink the blood of the first man he kills', which may be the passage that Spenser has in mind here (Herodotus 1972: 291; Spenser 1949: 340-1). But Irenius then uses the story of *Arsacomus* in *Toxaris* to show that a more collective and commonly agreed spirit of revenge for an ill could be confirmed among the Irish, exactly like their Scythian ancestors and their Scottish counterparts. Irenius now cites George Buchanan's *History of Scotland* (1582), one of the key sources of a *View*, a move that has surprising and complex ramifications.[6] In doing so, Irenius suggests that the Irish practise a form of primitive democracy, a more admirable social characteristic than the blood-drinking (cf. Kliger 1950: 490-7). Buchanan's *History* argued that the Scots, like other Northern peoples such as the Danes, had developed democratic forms of political representation, enabling the people to participate in the process of government, culminating in the practice of elective kingship, whereby the monarch ruled on behalf of the people who possessed real power.[7] The Irish may have things to teach the English about root and branch political practice, although such lessons can only be learned once the island has been reduced to submission after a bloody war of conquest.

[14] The last detail, which connects the Irish mode of swearing oaths with that of the Scythians, is also significant. In citing *Olaus Magnus*, another key source of *A View*, Spenser is deliberately connecting the Irish to the other peoples of the North, all descendants of the Scythians. *Olaus Magnus* is used as a key authority linking Irish and Scythians. Commenting on the practice of Booleying, or transhumance (following herds of cattle in a seasonal fashion rather than establishing settled patterns of agricultural production), a defining feature of early modern Irish society for many English commentators, Irenius comments, 'The which appeareth plain to be the manner of the Scythians As ye maye reade in *Olaus Magnus*' (Spenser 1949: 97-8). Commenting on the Irish use of broad

shields, Irenius again cites Olaus Magnus as an authority to claim that they are Scythian in design and origin (Spenser 1949: 106).

[15] Olaus Magnus's compendious *A Description of the Northern Peoples* (1555) was not translated into English until 1658, but circulated widely in Latin and was the standard account of the subject throughout the early modern period. The work, which acknowledges its debt to predecessors such as Saxo Grammaticus, paints a familiar picture of nations characterised by their savagery and military aggression, masculine virtue, sexual restraint and democratic political forms. Olaus Magnus, like Saxo Grammaticus before him, is eager to connect the political history of Rome to that of the Northern peoples. In the opening book, there is a description of funeral monuments and their important role in exhorting the people to follow the examples of their dead rulers 'to embrace virtue and abominate vices' (Magnus 1996-8: I. 67). Accordingly, the Swedes built a series of obelisks and other monoliths, 'wedge-shaped, rounded, oblong, or upright, and their lofty markings in Gothic letters give instruction, as if at the command of some ruler then alive, of what is to be pursued and what shunned by their successors' (Magnus 1996-8: I. 67). Olaus Magnus then comments on the monuments that have *not* been built: 'We must not doubt, either, that in those times a similar ordinance was observed in the kingdoms of the North against embalming the bodies of evil-natured princes and tyrants, to prevent them obtaining an honourable burial, just as the Roman Senate decreed, according to Marius Maximus and Aelius Lampridius, against the Emperor Commodus' (Magnus 1996-8: I. 67-8). There follows a long passage from the compilation of late Roman sources known as *Scriptores Historiae Augustae*, which argues that the remains of cruel tyrants should be destroyed, concluding, after a series of descriptions of the infringement of personal liberties, with Commodus's political crimes: 'The man who put the Senate up for sale, who seized the inheritance from men's sons, let him be dragged with the hook: because he lived for the ruin of the citizens and for his own disgrace. Therefore his statues are to be removed and his name erased from all places public and private' (Magnus 1996-8: I. 68). The political ethos of Republican Rome has moved to the North and its citizens have inherited its mantle. Like the Romans, the Swedes honour the good dead and forget the bad dead, a practice reflected in contemporary biography (cf. Pritchard 2005, Backus 2008).

[16] Book Eight, 'On the Position of Rulers and Officials and on Military Training', opens with a chapter describing the nature of elective kingship, a political process that Olaus Magnus evidently endorses. He describes the tyrannous behaviour of those who 'try to hasten the attribution of the royal title to themselves by threatening to bring in foreign princes and at the same time enlisting violence and the aid of arms', and whose fate will be a short and unhappy reign because 'their authority, gained by force yet denied by the people's wish, will be of short duration' (Magnus 1996-8: II. 350). Such tyranny is a direct contrast to the open and fair nature of good government:

Whatever the outcome, that person always enters, endures, and departs more serenely who is called to the throne by the voice of a reasonably fore-sighted people, as someone who is considered the most distinguished and energetic in his spirit and courage, among his own folk and in the ranks of the enemy. For he believes nothing has greater priority, or consorts more with ancient tradition, than to make certain that his noblemen and people have just government, a strong defence, and lasting peace. When and if he carries out this policy, the people will not bear to let anyone else claim the honours of kingship (Magnus 1996-8: II. 351).

The case made is exactly the same as that made by Buchanan: that lawful kingship is in the gift of the people and only if their wishes are satisfied can the mutual respect between monarch and subjects function properly, ensuring the proper government of the state

(Buchanan 2003: 161). Elective monarchy enables the different estates of society to work together for their mutual benefit.

[17] The point is made later in the same book, when Olaus Magnus cites the political maxims of the Goths, showing that they have been especially successful in war because they are so good at uniting themselves under one ruler. The Goths recognise the importance of pulling together under a leader of their choice and the need to operate as an organism because ‘When sinews are cut the limbs weaken... Nor do bodies stand firm when the bones have been removed’ (Magnus 1996-8: II. 375). Olaus Magnus employs the familiar image of the body politic, the king serving as the rational head: ‘When many wish to govern, all lose government at once’ (Magnus 1996-8: II. 375: see Sennet 23-4, *passim*, and Hale, *passim*). But the trope is used to show that ruler and people need to be in harmony because the state is based on the principle of individual liberty: ‘An ignoble mind is neither anxious for liberty nor keeps a given pledge’ (Magnus 1996-8: II. 375). The warlike Goths are yet another example that virtue, if preserved by the hard life of the bellicose Northern world, will flourish.

[18] A large section of Books 8 and 9, which are centrally concerned with issues of warfare rather than government, deals with the problems of misgovernment. Moreover, one of the key points of comparison is the history of Rome. Writing about the effects of a shortage of fodder for horses during a sustained campaign, Olaus Magnus turns to the civil war between Caesar and Pompey, and describes how Caesar’s army had to strip leaves from trees and crush roots because all the corn had gone (Magnus 1996-8: II. 459). Relating the cases of horses swimming with their riders, he turns to Tacitus’s description of the Germans who were experts at such feats (Magnus 1996-8: II. 504), and later cites Tacitus as an authority on German banqueting practices (Magnus 1996-8: II. 652). It is hard not to read Olaus Magnus’s emphasis on Northern virtue in terms of a Tacitean paradigm. As in Saxo’s *History*, great value is placed on sexual morality, and a straightforward equation is made between tyranny and immorality and proper government and admirable restraint and regulation of sexual behaviour. Indeed, Olaus Magnus follows Saxo in recounting, with considerable gusto, the crimes—sexual and otherwise—committed at the Danish court, through a ‘licentiousness born of inactivity’:

Virgins might not marry until their maidenhood had been plucked; foreigners they would batter to death with bones; others they compelled to get drunk with vast quantities of liquor until they burst. No man might give his daughter in marriage unless he had purchased their goodwill and assent; no one might conclude a marriage unless he had first bought their permission with a bribe. Furthermore, it was not only to virgins but also a host of married women that they indiscriminately offered their acts of abandoned lust. They were driven by a kind of double frenzy, licentiousness mingled with ferocity, and strangers and guests were treated to abuse instead of welcome. Such were the many scornful provocations found among this lewd and impudent crew, for under a boy king recklessness was fostered by liberty (Magnus 1996-8: II. 384).

This is not, of course, true liberty, but the false licentiousness generated by tyranny. The bonds of marriage and sexual restraint break down; corruption sullies everything; nothing can be achieved without bribery; the rules of hospitality are routinely broken and the worst aspects of human behaviour flourish. Here, in miniature, we have a description that condenses all the vices of the Julio-Claudian courts—in particular the onset of vice under Nero—into a paragraph, a comparison that Olaus Magnus, following Tacitus, undoubtedly has in mind (cf. Mellor, 13, 52-3). Elsewhere Olaus Magnus cites Cicero to show that the worst of the Northern kings are more degenerate and corrupt than their Roman counterparts: ‘Cicero tells us that the sadistic Verres destroyed one harmless man in the reek emitted by rotten logs; but with this Jösse [a Dane put in charge of Sweden ‘in order to

disembowel her’], who was possessed by the same spirit of malice, it was not one but innumerable innocent inhabitants of Dalecarlia whom he hung over smoke and killed’ (II. 379). Olaus Magnus, as a Swede, has a particular animus against the Danes, their rivals and often overlords, and he uses Saxo to good effect to recount the vices and atrocities of Denmark. Nevertheless, the points of comparison and the moral nature of the political story of the *History* are clear enough. Olaus Magnus describes with approval the character of the hard fighting men of the North:

In fact, to sum up, valiant and trusty men, though they are exceedingly scarce, work with the aim of preserving a harmonious fellow-sympathy among the prince’s subjects, and to ensure that limits to tax or possessions, appointed and put in writing, shall in the interests of general public peace remain inviolable. Such courageous individuals also show great daring in tackling dangers, and much wisdom in making their way out of troubles, because their will cannot be overcome by any suffering, nor their body weakened by any tribulations or distresses. They are content to seek the hard ground or flint-stones for their repose rather than a soft bed, which is fit for the milksop who carries no weapons (Magnus 1996-8: II. 445).

The last sentence might well stand as a metonymic detail encapsulating the character of the North. The tough nature of the people means that they will not stand for tyranny and, in the end, good will always triumph because ‘no oppression by tyrants remains unpunished for ever’ (Magnus 1996-8: II. 438). The warlike Northerners have learned how to fight back for their own good and have established patterns and practices of government that their more privileged neighbours would do well to heed and copy. The Northerners understand the real value of liberty and have no interest in the superficial trappings of ornate and decadent culture, especially when privilege is perceived as an entitlement rather than a right which can be, but has to be, earned. Readers in England had to work out how Northern they were in nature and act accordingly.

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NOTES

- [1] For an ingenious attempt to reconstruct Shakespeare’s working library, see Bate 2008, ch. 9. [[back to text](#)]
- [2] Nero was actually supposed to have played the lyre. For the history of his reign, see Malitz 1999. More generally, see Le Glay, Voisin and Le Bohec 2001. [[back to text](#)]
- [3] On Portia see Marshall 2002: 170-87. [[back to text](#)]
- [4] See, for example, the discussion in McCabe 2002, especially part 2. [[back to text](#)]
- [5] For commentary on Spenser and Lucian’s *Toxaris*, see Coughlan 1989: 61-8, and Hadfield 1997: 105-7. [[back to text](#)]
- [6] For further discussion, see Hadfield 2009 (forthcoming). [[back to text](#)]
- [7] The argument is outlined more fully in Buchanan’s *Dialogue*. For commentary, see Kingdon 1991: 215-8; Burns 199: 138-58; and Burns 1996. [[back to text](#)]

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