

## *A tale of two Germanias: Translations of Tacitus into Danish in the Revolutionary Decade*

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*Abstract:* Tacitus' *Germania* was translated into Danish twice in the 1790s, first by the historian and jurist Gustav Ludvig Baden (1764–1839) in 1795, and then by his father, the professor of rhetoric Jacob Baden (1735–1805) in 1797. Both translations can be understood as part of a sustained effort to introduce Tacitean and other concepts from classical literature to enrich philosophical reasoning in the vernacular.

The politics of the translations were radically at odds. Through the rhetorical use of conceptual vocabulary, exhaustive footnotes, and an unstable temporality, G. L. Baden constructed a narrative of a democratic republican and rationalist 'golden age' relevant for contemporary Denmark-Norway. Jacob Baden's foreignizing translation was a conservative response. It employed a stable modern historicity which separated the 'golden age' from the barbarous reality of northern antiquity.

The article raises the question of the significance of oblique argument in the constrained Danish-Norwegian public sphere of the 1790s. The form of G. L. Baden's translation is characterised by a temporal and linguistic strategic ambiguity. This provided a veil of deniability for the translator, but the translation was clearly understood to be a radical polemic, eliciting reactions in the public sphere.

*Keywords:* Tacitism; translation studies; political theory; pagan enlightenment; neo-roman liberty; classical republicanism; secularism; Gustav Ludvig Baden; Jacob Baden; Danish enlightenment

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*Tacitus and the politics of republicanism*<sup>1</sup>

In 1799, the radical author and critic Peter Andreas Heiberg (1758–1851) argued in the journal *Læsning for Publicum* that the teaching of the Latin classical authors, in particular Tacitus, corrupted the youth of the Dano-Norwegian twin monarchy. The journal was founded by Heiberg to publicise the watershed court case against him under the censorship laws, heralding tighter control over public expressions in Denmark-Norway. Heiberg pointed a finger at the professor of rhetoric in Copenhagen, Jacob Baden, a well-known conservative pillar of the establishment who recently had finished his translation of the collected works of Tacitus. Baden's insubordination in making his translation was far graver than any criticism Heiberg had made of the royal government, he claimed. How could any modern radical be faulted without hypocrisy when the canon of the Latin schools taught young men of the elite the insubordinate political rationality of Tacitus and other Roman republicans? For Heiberg, the Roman transcended the debate about the freedom of the press: Tacitus represented a fundamental republican critique of royal authority.<sup>2</sup>

Jacob Baden promptly wrote an answer in his own *Kjøbenhavns Universitets-Journal*. Baden argued the merits of reading Tacitus to learn political reasoning. The Roman's authorship purified modern, lawbound monarchical states from the temptations of autocracy, and provided a warning against irresponsible sloganeering, in particular the abuse of the term liberty to justify 'revolutionary illness.' As a parting shot, Baden argued that Heiberg could hardly ask for firmer proof of the liberal nature of the prince regent's government than the royal patronage for his own translation, which demonstrated the coexistence of freedom and absolutism, 'such as Tacitus preferred,' in contemporary Denmark.<sup>3</sup>

This exchange illustrates that the interpretation of Tacitus, the most prestigious and politically astute of the Roman historians, was contentious and highly politicised in the age of revolutions. Tacitism of both the so-called 'red' and 'black' veins were present in Copenhagen in the 1790s. Heiberg's antecedents in a 'red Tacitist' tradition of understanding Tacitus as a freedom-loving republi-

<sup>1</sup> My heartfelt thanks to my tutors, professors Leidulf Melve and Sverre Bagge, to professor Åslaug Ommundsen for comments on an early draft, as well as the anonymous referees of this article, the participants at the PhD seminar at the institute of archaeology, history, cultural and religious studies (AHKR), and the generous academic milieu at the University of Bergen.

<sup>2</sup> Peter Andreas Heiberg, *Læsning for Publikum*, 8 (1799). All translations from Danish in this article are by the author.

<sup>3</sup> Jacob Baden, 'Er Tacitus skicket til at opvække endogsaa Afskye for den monarkiske Regiering', *Kjøbenhavns Universitetsjournal*, 7 (1799).

can critic of tyranny included Guicciardini and Montesquieu as well as Heiberg's older contemporaries John Adams and Thomas Jefferson. The 'black Tacitist' interpretations of Tacitus as an analytical schoolmaster of a 'non-political' reason of state and master of the secrets of imperial rule also had deep roots in the Republic of Letters. As Peter Burke has observed, ostensibly non-political analyses of politics such as the 'black Tacitism' prevalent in the 1600s was a form of systemic loyalism, instructing and safeguarding the prescripts of statecraft, the *arcana imperii*, to the ruling cliques. Tacitism was a vehicle for controversial argument, ranging from secularising or sceptical political realism to power-oriented 'machievellism' and radical republicanism. Tacitism has been recognised as a current in the history of political thought, particularly in the late renaissance and the seventeenth century, and is currently subject to a revision which claims a greater role for Tacitism in the growth of secularised and realist conceptions of politics in Europe.<sup>4</sup> Scholarship on the late Enlightenment reception of Tacitus is more fragmentary.<sup>5</sup> The prevalence of 'red Tacitism' is of significance as a form of republican political thought in Denmark-Norway in the revolutionary period, and is particularly relevant as a possible source for republicanism in the

<sup>4</sup> Peter Burke, 'Tacitism', in *Tacitus*, ed. by T. A. Dorey (London: Routledge, 1969), pp. 149–71; Peter Burke, 'Tacitism, scepticism, and reason of state', in *The Cambridge History of Political Thought 1450–1700*, ed. by J. H. Burns (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 477–98. [Crossref](#); Jan Waszink, 'Your Tacitism or mine? Modern and early-modern conceptions of Tacitus and Tacitism', *History of European Ideas*, 36 (2010), pp 375–85. [Crossref](#) The revision I am referring to is an ongoing research project, see Jan Waszink, 'The Secularisation of the West: Tacitism from the 16th to the 18th century' <https://ncn.gov.pl/sites/default/files/listy-rankingowe/2019-09-16/streszczenia/467872-en.pdf> (accessed 7 May 2024). A study of continental translations in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries which also examines the politics of translations is Saul Martínez Bermejo, *Translating Tacitus. The reception of Tacitus works in the vernacular languages of Europe, 16th–17th centuries* (Pisa: Pisa University Press, 2010).

<sup>5</sup> For instances of analyses of Enlightenment Tacitism, see Ellen Marie Krefting, 'Enevelde, offentlighet og Peter Frederik Suhms hemmeligheter', in *Eneveldet før undergangen. Politisk kultur i Norge 1660–1814*, ed. by T. Bjerckås and K. Dørum (Oslo: Scandinavian Academic Press, 2017), pp. 385–411; Jacob Soll, 'J. G. A. Pocock's Atlantic Republicanism Thesis Revisited: The Case of John Adams's Tacitism', *Republics of Letters: A Journal for the Study of Knowledge, Politics, and the Arts*, 2 (2010), 21–37; Kai Ruffing, 'Principatus ac Libertas!? Tacitus, the Past and the Principate of Trajan', in *Usages of the past in Roman historiography*, ed. by A. Damtoft Poulsen and A. Jönsson (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2021), pp. 69–88. [Crossref](#); Howard D. Weinbrot, 'Politics, Taste, and National Identity: Some Uses of Tacitism in Eighteenth-Century Britain', in *Tacitus and the Tacitean Tradition*, ed. by T. J. Luce and A. J. Woodman (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), pp. 168–84. [Crossref](#)

political thinking of the Norwegian founding fathers and their Danish contemporaries.<sup>6</sup>

The exchange between Heiberg and Baden also provides insight in the political potential latent in oblique historiographical arguments in the largely representative public sphere in Denmark-Norway in the age of revolutions. Formal censorship rules did not require official approval prior to printing and have traditionally been portrayed as comparatively liberal in the 1784–1799 period. Recent research tends to put emphasis on the limits of this liberality, and the selective nature of the government’s use of public argument to mobilise support for specific reforms, most notably the Danish manorial system.<sup>7</sup> Police authorities retained and demonstratively applied force against opinion, fining and incarcerating political dissidents without judicial review. As a small literary language area, centred in a comparatively small urban society, the public sphere of the Danish-Norwegian state was also constrained by social ties, the centrality of career civil servants to discourse and the gatekeeping of editors who by the mid-1790s strategized to stave off the reimposition of censorship.<sup>8</sup>

The shifting constraints and rising politicisation of the public sphere gave rise to a wide range of authorial strategies, including pseudonymous debates, anonymous publication and oblique argument in historical writing.<sup>9</sup> When the tightening of government control of opinion culminated with the law of 27 September

<sup>6</sup> Håvard Friis Nilsen and Helge Jordheim, *Politisk frihet* (Oslo: Res Publica, 2014); Peter Sebastian Hatlebakk, ‘Bak statsmannens maske. En studie i Falsens Norgeshistorie’ (MA thesis, University of Bergen, 2015). <https://hdl.handle.net/1956/9714>; Håkon Andreas Evju, ‘En klassisk republikaner i det tidlige 1800-tallets Norge: Christian Magnus Falsen og hans “Norges Odelsret, med hensyn paa Rigets Constitution”’, in *Smak av frihet: 1814–grunnloven: historisk virkning og sosial forankring*, ed. by Odd Arvid Storsveen, Bård Frydenlund, and Amund Pedersen (Oslo: Scandinavian Academic Press, 2015), pp. 139–76.

<sup>7</sup> Øystein Rian, *Sensuren i Danmark-Norge: vilkårene for offentlige ytringer 1536–1814* (Oslo: Universitetsforl., 2014); Thomas Munck, ‘Public debate, politics and print. The late Enlightenment in Copenhagen during the years of the French Revolution 1786–1800’, *Historisk Tidsskrift* [Denmark], 114 (2015), pp. 323–51; Eva Krause Jørgensen, ‘The Feud of the Jutlandic Proprietors: Protesting Reform and Facing the Public in Late Eighteenth-Century Denmark’, *Eighteenth-century studies*, 52 (2019), pp. 411–29. [Crossref](#); Håkon Evju, *Ancient Constitutions and Modern Monarchy: Historical Writing and Enlightened Reform in Denmark-Norway 1730–1814* (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2019). [Crossref](#)

<sup>8</sup> Håkon Andreas Evju, ‘“Skrivefrihedens Rigsdag”. Patriotisme, trykkefrihet og politisk deltagelse under det sene eneveldet’, in *Politisk kompetanse: Grunnlovas borgar 1814–2014*, ed. by Nils Rune Langeland (Oslo: Pax, 2014), pp. 143–67.

<sup>9</sup> Henrik Horstbøll, ‘Anonymiteten, trykkefriheten og forfatterrollens forandring i 1700-tallets Danmark’, *Lychnos: årsbok för idé- och lärdoms historia: annual of the Swedish History of Science Society* (2010), pp. 147–61; Emil Nicklas Johnsen, ‘I Klios forgård: forfatterroller, offentlighet og politisk evaluering i Niels Ditlev Riegels’ (1755–1802) historieskriving’ (PhD thesis, University of Oslo, 2019).

1799, Heiberg went into a lifelong exile in Paris, where successive revolutionary regimes evoked Rome, Sparta and Athens as potent examples of democratic practices.

An important vehicle for tacitism was translations of the Roman historian's works. A number of vernacular translations were made by key intellectuals of the late enlightenment, including d'Alembert, Rousseau, Diderot and Schiller. For the reading public in the conglomerate state of Denmark-Norway, the *Germania* was translated twice, by Jacob Baden (1735–1805) and his son, Gustav Ludvig Baden (1764–1839). G. L. Baden, an aspiring political historian, published a translation in 1795, dedicating it to his father at his 60th birthday.<sup>10</sup> Jacob Baden published his translation two years later as part of a three-volume collected works of Tacitus. The collected works were the consummation of an ambition which Baden had nurtured ever since he published a translation of *Agricola* in 1766.<sup>11</sup> The analysis of the translations in this article is as a source to the political thinking in the period. This approach, emphasising the politics of translation, contrasts to translation studies which examine philological or literary practices.<sup>12</sup>

In the early modern period, Tacitus' *Germania* was regarded as the most prestigious of Roman texts concerned with the history of the North. The leading Danish-Norwegian historiographers of the mid-eighteenth century, Peter Frederik Suhm and Gerhard Schøningh, treated *Germania* as a reliable source relevant to Nordic antiquity. Particularly following the cultural turn of European philosophical historiography and political theory in the 1770s, *Germania* was understood as a paramount source to the popular character of the Nordic peoples. Famously, ancient 'liberty began in the forests', according to Montesquieu – with *Germania* as his source.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Cornelius Tacitus, *Cajus Cornelius Tacitus om Germaniens Beliggenhed, Sæder og Folkeslag: af det Latinske*. Trans. by G.L. Baden (Kjøbenhavn: trykt paa S. Poulsens Forlag, 1795). Digitized: <https://www.kb.dk/e-mat/dod/130022840399-color.pdf>.

<sup>11</sup> Cornelius Tacitus, *Forsøg til en Oversættelse af Tacitus, tilligemed en Afhandling om Sprogets Beringelse ved nye Ord og Vendinger*. Trans. by Jacob Baden (Kjøbenhavn: Schiønning, 1766). Digitized: [https://www.kb.dk/e-mat/dod/130022840501\\_color.pdf](https://www.kb.dk/e-mat/dod/130022840501_color.pdf); Cornelius Tacitus, *Caius Cornelius Tacitus af det Latinske med de fornødenste Anmærkninger, især for Ustuderede*, I–III. Trans. by Jacob Baden (Kjøbenhavn, 1773–1797). Digitized (vol. III). A modern translation I've used for reference is P. Cornelius Tacitus, *Dialogus. Agricola. Germania*. Trans. by Michael Winterbottom (Cambridge, Mass: Loeb, Harvard University Press, 1970).

<sup>12</sup> For instance Johanna Akujärvi, '...til Rusin–Strutar och Tortebotnar: Översättningsars nytta enligt förord till svenska översättningar av antik litteratur under 1700-talets första hälft', *Sjuttonhundratalet: Nordic Yearbook for Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 7 (2010), 50–73. [Crossref](#)

<sup>13</sup> For a succinct overview of the long reception history, see Christopher B. Krebs, *A most dangerous book: Tacitus's Germania from the Roman Empire to the Third Reich* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2011).

In this article, I will discuss a controversy arising from political usage of Tacitus; namely the translations into Danish in the 1790s of the *Germania*. By comparing the temporality, the conceptual vocabularies and footnotes of the two translations, I will explain the politics and strategies of the translators – and shed light on the peculiar nature of the public sphere they were written for.

### *'Det Smagende Selskab' and vernacular translations*

The overarching goal of translating Tacitus and other classics into Danish had been an undertaking throughout Jacob Baden's life, ever since he entered on the scholarly life as a grammar schoolmaster and literary critic in the early 1760s. Baden was a leading light in *Selskabet til de skønne og nyttige videnskabers forfremmelse* (The Society for the Advancement of Beautiful and Useful Sciences, often referred to as *Det smagende Selskab*, i.e. The Tasting Society) and from 1780, secretary to the society. The society sought to enrich the Danish language through its systematic use in poetry, science and criticism. This has traditionally been understood as a turning point in the development of a Danish national literature, and recent research has shown it as central to the development of a fledgling public sphere of the mid-1700s.<sup>14</sup> Significantly, the society's programme also included translations into Danish of classical works. Jacob Baden translated Xenophon and Horace, and was the dedicatee of translations of Livy, Quintilian and Plutarch made by former students.

The interest in translations grew out of a theory of language particularism introduced to Denmark by Baden and his associate, the historian-statesman Ove Guldberg.<sup>15</sup> Baden developed this in a treatise published along with *Agricola* in 1766. In it, Baden claimed the value of translating the particular genius of Tacitus, as a classic which laid open rich veins to mine for a philosophical language of patriotic citizenship.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>14</sup> See for example Thor Inge Rørvik, "'---skreven af den samme onde Aand...'" – striden mellom *Lærde Efterretninger* og Jacob Baden, 1767–1768', in *Kritikk før 1814*, ed. by Eivind Tjønneland (Bergen: Dreyers forlag, 2014), pp. 169–91. Jacob Baden made his translation from the edition of J. A. Ernesti (1752), under whom he studied in Leipzig.

<sup>15</sup> Note the preface to Plinius Secundus, *Plinii Lovtale til Trajanum*. Trans. by Ove Guldberg (Sorø: Mummies Boglade, 1763) and Ove Guldberg, 'Pris-Skriftet over det fremsatte Spørsmaal: Hvad Indflydelse det har i de smukke Videnskaber naar oplyste og polerede Folk stræbe at overgaae hinanden', in *Forsøg i de skønne og nyttige Videnskaber. Første bind* (København, 1764). Baden thanked Guldberg for encouraging him to translate the *Annales*.

<sup>16</sup> J. Baden in Cornelius Tacitus, *Forsøg til en Oversættelse*, pp. 139–40. Note also Johan Heinrich Schlegel, *Afhandling om det Danske Sprogs Fordeele og Mangler i Sammenligning med det Tydske og det Franske Sprog* (København: Nicolaus Møller, 1763), pp. 34–5.

The translation movement's aim to enrich the Danish language by introducing words and concepts from an expanding corpus of classics was an immediate context for the Tacitus translations in the 1790s. This assumed an understanding of the work primarily as a literary classic rather than as a historical source. This did not mean that the aesthetic qualities of the authorship were more important than its meaning. Throughout his publications, Jacob Baden presented Tacitus as a crucially important source for a polished and nuanced philosophical vocabulary, important specifically to develop arguments and concepts for political reasoning. This was in keeping with the tradition of black tacitism, which understood Tacitus as the master of the artifice of state. Baden's overarching project was to make this mode of reasoning accessible for Danish usage.

### *The rhetorical strategies of the translations*

The two translations of *Germania* are free and diverge at crucial points. While the vocabulary of G. L. Baden's translation is more Nordicising and Jacob Baden's is closer to common usage, the freedom of the translations is less obvious from the texts of the translations in isolation than from the note apparatus which accompanies them. The footnotes are extensive and often physically dominate the pages by their sheer volume. The notes function as interpretative glosses in both of the translations and impose interpretations and conceptual vocabularies on the *Germania* which alter or rhetorically redescribe the meaning of the text.<sup>17</sup>

Gustav Ludvig Baden was far more disposed to introduce contemporary political concepts into the text than his father. Jacob Baden selectively reuses G. L. Baden's footnotes, occasionally reprinting, omitting or explicitly contradicting his son's glosses. The dialogue Jacob Baden constructs between the note apparatuses of the two translations is important to understand the politics of his translation.

In László Kontler's terms, G. L. Baden's is a domesticating translation, in which the translation associates ancient *Germania* with the readers' own immediate Danish late-enlightenment contexts. This tendency is there in the text, but is predominantly and ostentatiously a result of the paratexts.<sup>18</sup>

Jacob Baden's 1797 translation took the opposite approach. His was a foreignizing translation, which underscored the strange otherness of the barbarian

<sup>17</sup> Quentin Skinner, 'Moral ambiguity and the art of eloquence', in *Visions of politics*, 3 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), II, pp. 264–85. [Crossref](#)

<sup>18</sup> László Kontler, 'Translation and Comparison: Early-Modern and Current Perspectives', *Contributions to the history of concepts*, 3 (2007), pp. 71–102. [Crossref](#); László Kontler, 'Translation and Comparison II: A Methodological Inquiry into Reception in the History of Ideas', *Contributions to the history of concepts*, 4 (2008), pp. 27–56. [Crossref](#)

inhabitants of the *Germania*. This otherness is social, geographic, and most significantly, temporal. For Jacob Baden, the barbarians stood at a stage of cultural development deep in the mists of a distant past; they had no didactic value for the polished social life of the 1790s.

### *Gustav Ludvig Baden's esoteric Germania*

G. L. Baden associates the inhabitants of Germania with the Danes. The modern Danes were identified with the select, small and important tribe of Nuitons, which he argued was a misspelling of Teutons, linking the Nuitons of Tacitus to the Cimbrian and Teuton invaders of Rome at the time of Marius (c.100 BCE). The Teutons were stewards of the sacred island with the temple of the Germanic Goddess Herta, which Baden argued was Zeeland.<sup>19</sup>

The identification of the Teutons with the Danes accords with the claims of Hans Peter Anchersen (1700–1765), who drew an arch between Saxo and Tacitus by describing the old Danish royal seat in Lejre as the site of the temple.<sup>20</sup> This was contradicted by Peter Fr. Suhm (1728–98), who saw in Femeren the likely site of the Teutons, and Gerhard Schøning (1722–80), who moved them south of the Elbe.<sup>21</sup> Disregarding the leading Danish-Norwegian historiographers of the older generation, Baden reforged the link: In blood and geography as well as mores and laws, *Germania* is a book about the Danes and Danishness.<sup>22</sup>

In the preface, G. L. Baden suggestively raised the problems of interpretation of the work by means of rhetorical questions. Had Tacitus been in Germania or not? Did Tacitus write with an aim to criticize the Romans themselves? This admission of ambiguity on the part of the original author enjoins a heightened linguistic consciousness and gives the translator leeway in his translation. The translator reveals to the reader a possible esoteric interpretation of the text – that the ancient Germans are in fact at least in part the Romans. The preface first proclaims the paramount importance and clarity of *Germania* for contemporary Denmark, and then casts doubt on the straightforward trustworthiness of the text.

<sup>19</sup> G.L. Baden in Cornelius Tacitus, *Germaniens Beliggenhed*, p. 71 n3.

<sup>20</sup> Hans Peter Anchersen, *Herthedal ved Leyre i Sieland, og det gamle Danmark 150 Aar før og efter Chr. Føds.* (København, 1745).

<sup>21</sup> Peter Friderich Suhm, *Om Odin og den hedniske Gudelære og Gudstieneste udi Norden* (København: Brødrene Berling, 1771), pp. 241–47. Gerhard Schøning, 'Afhandling om de gamle Grækere og Romeres rette Begreb og Kundskab om de Nordiske Lande, særdeles om den af dem saa kaldte Scandinavia', *Skrifter, som udi det Kiøbenhavnske Selskab af Lærdoms og Videnskabers Elskere ere fremlagte og oplæste*, 9 (1765), 151–360 (pp. 274–77).

<sup>22</sup> G.L. Baden in Cornelius Tacitus, *Germaniens Beliggenhed*, p. 71 n3, p. 72 n1.



Rhetorical ambiguity of this order often signals oblique argument in enlightenment writing. The importance and proximity of *Germania* to the Danish present of the domesticating translation suggests that G. L. Baden employs the translation at least in part as a vehicle for making his own arguments about Danish laws, mores and politics in his own time. This is fairly transparent and occasionally fully explicit, to the extent that the translation is oblique only in the technical sense of providing a veil of deniability for G. L. Baden's political commentary.<sup>23</sup>

The temporality of G. L. Baden's domesticating translation is highly unstable, and occasionally veers into complete presentism.<sup>24</sup> This ambiguity is intended, as is clear from the preface, where 'the golden text' about 'our ancient fathers' converges with contemporary life, because 'the same laws, the same institutions, the same customs which Tacitus has stored for us' hold currency, 'even if they are differently modelled.'<sup>25</sup> G. L. Baden's statement that he aims to 'clarify, enlighten and reinforce' the importance of Tacitus for contemporary mores for the reader by citing other historiographers encapsulates the inherent tension in this fraught temporality, which is both historical and not quite self-evidently current enough.

The essential sameness of the distant past allows G. L. Baden to occasionally introduce direct comments on contemporary life in his footnote glosses, particularly about social mores. When Tacitus describes the faithfulness and chastity of the Germanic women despite their revealing clothes in chapter 18, G. L. Baden sarcastically notes that 'more recently', 'while the law of 27 February 1784 had imposed a more restrictive code of dress, one should allow that the beauty of a bared neck would make an impression.' G. L. Baden also argues against the criminality of extramarital affairs<sup>26</sup> and (sarcastically?) against the legalization of divorce in Denmark-Norway,<sup>27</sup> about the bad state of public houses in Jutland, etc. In these instances, even the pretention of historical distance collapses.

<sup>23</sup> See for example Leo Strauss, *Persecution and the art of writing* (Glencoe, Ill: Free Press, 1952); Skinner, 'Retrospect: Studying rhetoric and conceptual change', in *Visions of politics*, I, pp. 175–87. [Crossref](#)

<sup>24</sup> The following discussion on temporality draws on J. G. A. Pocock, 'Time, institutions and action: an essay on traditions and their understanding', in *Politics, Language & Time. Essays on Political Thought and History*, 2nd edn (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1989 [1971]), pp. 233–72; F. R. Ankersmit, 'The sublime dissociation of the past, or: how to be(come) what one is no longer', *History and theory*, 40 (2001), pp. 295–323. [Crossref](#); François Hartog, *Regimes of historicity: presentism and experiences of time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015). [Crossref](#)

<sup>25</sup> G.L. Baden, 'Oversætterens Forerinding' (Translator's preface), in Cornelius Tacitus, *Germaniens Beliggenhed*, unpaginated.

<sup>26</sup> G.L. Baden in Cornelius Tacitus, *Germaniens Beliggenhed*, pp. 36–9 n1.

<sup>27</sup> G.L. Baden in Cornelius Tacitus, *Germaniens Beliggenhed*, pp. 43–4 n4.

The temporality of the paratexts is not straightforwardly presentist. Because the *Germania* is both ancient history and contemporary mores, the distinction between the past and the present is diffuse and strategically ambiguous. The footnote glosses contain arguments on a gliding scale between arguments seemingly purely about the past, a description of a primordial golden age as a repository of mores which are relevant and normative for the present, and direct comments on contemporary Denmark-Norway.

G. L. Baden's use of footnotes is the main mechanism for the rhetorical re-description of the past. The citation practice employed by G. L. Baden creates an erudite impression yet is both more and less than a forthright citation of sources which support the arguments stated in the footnote. On occasion, G. L. Baden constructs controversy between citations as a smokescreen for his own point of view;<sup>28</sup> simply uses the citation as a foil, contradicting the authority he cites;<sup>29</sup> invests meaning in citations which is clearly not there;<sup>30</sup> and occasionally simply contradicts Tacitus with no stated alternative source.<sup>31</sup> G. L. Baden's treatment of particular topics is drawn out over a number of footnotes, which together provide sustained narrative and arguments about liberty, monarchy and religion.

### 'Sacred Popular Liberty'

While the translation hardly provides a fully elaborated set of political concepts, it does provide a distinctive view of the political mores of the ancient north which corresponds to burning questions in the political discourse in late enlightenment Denmark-Norway. This exposition will focus on G. L. Baden's treatment of monarchy, aristocracy, popular participation and religion, which encompass a broader radical enlightenment vision of politics.

G. L. Baden's re-description of kingly authority largely happens by a presentist gloss on Tacitus' text and relies heavily on the text of the *Germania* itself. G. L.

<sup>28</sup> G.L. Baden in Cornelius Tacitus, *Germaniens Beliggenhed*, for example p. 20 n2.

<sup>29</sup> G.L. Baden in Cornelius Tacitus, *Germaniens Beliggenhed*, for instance, p. 32 n5, where he contradicts Schøning and Rothe, and makes claims which far outpace the baroque jurist Stiernhöök: see Johan Olofsson Stiernhöök, *Om svears och götars forna rätt* (Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1981), pp. 33–7; Gerhard Schøning, *Norges Riiges Historie : Første Deel* (Sorø: Heineck Mumme og Faber paa Børsen i Kiøbenhavn, 1771), pp. 432–4. Rothe seems closer to Baden's meaning in other places than those cited by Baden, see Tyge Rothe, *Nordens Staetsforfatning: Deel 2* (Kiøbenhavn: Gyldendal, 1782), pp. 92–4.

<sup>30</sup> G.L. Baden in Cornelius Tacitus, *Germaniens Beliggenhed*, for example p. 24 n2.

<sup>31</sup> G.L. Baden in Cornelius Tacitus, *Germaniens Beliggenhed*, for example p. 40 n1: there were cities in Northern antiquity.

Baden's treatment of religion and aristocracy run against the grain of the text of the *Germania* and contains longer passages of more overt social criticism.

In chapters 11–15, which concern the election of princes, the form of rule and the virtues of the chiefs and the strongest warriors, Tacitus describes an elective kingship. Kingly authority needed popular acceptance in questions of importance. When the people were assembled, different opinions were heard, and the king had to persuade rather than command. Assent was given by acclaim by the assembly brandishing their spears or refused by a growling murmur.

G. L. Baden develops this view of monarchy substantively, adding a distinct constitutionalist imprint. He quotes a passage from Caesar's *Gallic Wars* to the effect that the nature of the government of the king of the Eburonians was such that the people had as much authority over him as he over the people, then adds that the 'people were not his subjects, but subjects of the laws' and that the people would dismiss him if he employed his power outside the law. The footnote ends in the present tense, as G. L. Baden disfavouredly contrasts the 17th-century absolutist theorist Otto Sperling ('a servile flatterer of kings') to the contemporary German jurist Andreas Schnaubert, who demonstrates 'that the king is not elevated above the laws, but is the first servant of the law, and the highest civil servant of the people.'<sup>32</sup>

Baden equates the popular assemblies in chapter 12 with modern legal and legislative assemblies, linking the ancient northern mores described by Tacitus, old Norse sources like Snorri, and the present political situation.<sup>33</sup> Popular representation is presented as an intrinsic part of the mores of the northern peoples.

Baden employs Tacitus to articulate an ideal type of kingship: the nature of legitimate northern monarchy remains limited and lawbound. Royal power is performed in the public assembly with the running legislative assent of the populace.<sup>34</sup>

In the footnotes to chapters 13–15, G. L. Baden explicitly argues away any hint of the existence of aristocracy in *Germania*. When Tacitus describes noble birth or the greatness of family connections as marking youths out as chiefs, Baden comments that ancient popular liberty allowed no aristocratic claim to rank, offices and privileges.<sup>35</sup>

Baden discounts the existence of a substantial aristocracy of birth in the primordial age of popular liberty, which is contrasted to the 'later epochs' of the post-Odin Norse age and the Christian Middle Ages. In his view, Tacitus was mis-

<sup>32</sup> G.L. Baden in Cornelius Tacitus, *Germaniens Beliggenhed*, p. 20 n2.

<sup>33</sup> G.L. Baden in Cornelius Tacitus, *Germaniens Beliggenhed*, p. 31 n1.

<sup>34</sup> G.L. Baden in Cornelius Tacitus, *Germaniens Beliggenhed*, for example p. 76 n2 and n3.

<sup>35</sup> G.L. Baden in Cornelius Tacitus, *Germaniens Beliggenhed*, pp. 33–4 n2; also, p. 54 n5.

takenly applying the standards of his own country.<sup>36</sup> In antiquity there was merely an aristocracy of greater wealth, not of legal privilege, and their power was held in check by the popular assemblies.

Devoid of a despotic aristocracy, the ancient north possessed a powerful class of self-owning warrior-farmers. The Tacitean ‘fortissimus [et] bellicosissimus’ is equated with ‘Odelsbonde’, or ‘Odelsbønder’ in the plural. The introduction of these yeomen or self-owning farmer-citizens, an enduring common feature of the historiography of Danish-Norwegian primordial popular liberty, leads into a two-fold discussion about liberty.<sup>37</sup>

On the one hand, the treatment of the ancient Scandinavian allodial rights leads into a criticism of contemporary aristocratic privilege, centred on taxation and patronage rights over legal and ecclesiastical offices. G. L. Baden points to the social ills stemming from double legal standards. Since the aristocracy have incentives for persecuting their tenantry, their patronage rights corrupt the entire church and legal system. G. L. Baden starkly denounces the remaining financial and legal privileges of the Danish aristocracy as a usurpation of the rights of citizens and sovereign, a subversion of the common good:<sup>38</sup>

To say that the essence of the usurped glories of our present manorial system is the same as the freedom from taxation of the yeomen’s farms, the same as the free yeoman’s former glories which were sustained by the State constitution at that time is – it seems to me – to support the scaffolding erected by hideous aristocracy to break down popular liberty, which the historian, without fearing the loss of beneficial favour with the mighty, should do what he can to pull down.

G. L. Baden describes aristocratic privilege as the overwhelming problem of contemporary Europe, in their origins ‘usurpations and violent encroachments in the rights of the people and the prince’, the greatest obstacle against popular liberty. Interestingly, he goes on to state that it is the role of the historian to contribute to tear down aristocratic privilege.<sup>39</sup> Here, the distinction between the past and the present is not only completely suspended; the restitution of a constitution

<sup>36</sup> G.L. Baden in Cornelius Tacitus, *Germaniens Beliggenhed*, pp. 36–9 n1. See also notes 3–5 on pp. 54–55.

<sup>37</sup> G.L. Baden in Cornelius Tacitus, *Germaniens Beliggenhed*, pp. 36–9 n1.

<sup>38</sup> ‘At sige derfor, det væsentlige af vore nu værende Hovedgaardes usurperede Herligheder, er eet med Odelsjords forne Skattefrihed, eet med den fri Jordegnes forne i da værende Statskonstitution grundede Herligheder, er – synes mig – at opretholde disse det fæle Aristokraties til Folkefrihedens Nedbrud opsatte Stilladser, dem Historikeren, uden Sky for hos hine Mægtige at tabe gavnlig Yndest, bør gjøre sit til at nedrive.’ G.L. Baden in Cornelius Tacitus, *Germaniens Beliggenhed*, pp. 36–9 n1 (p. 38).

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

characterised by popular liberty is understood as a purpose of historiography itself.

G. L. Baden develops a notion of citizenship well beyond the criticism of aristocratic privilege, however. In part he argues for the dispersion of property rights in society, which he sees as preferable because it roots out the ills of privilege and engenders private virtue. Citizenship is, however, in its essence, a form of political participation. The ancient *Odelsbønder* were not a privileged class; they had freedom from arbitrary taxation by their kings 'beyond that which had been legitimately acclaimed in the popular assembly'; they retained popular control over the legitimate use of taxes and legal safeguards against the abuse of royal power. Ultimately, this freedom stemmed from their citizenship under the 'state constitution' rather than their property rights. Legitimate taxation and legislation was based on a principle of political participation, and participatory democracy was ultimately linked to military service. The *Odelsbonde* is a warrior-farmer-citizen, echoing the republican topos of classical historiography:<sup>40</sup>

Even if we let the yeoman's freedom from taxation be other than that which followed from the property he possessed, let it be other than that arbitrary royal decree could not extort from him any tax which had not been enacted by the clamour of arms, let it be other than the proud right to demand accounts from the bailiffs of the state to ensure the proper use of taxes without therefore exposing themselves to accusations of being foolhardy or a rebel, etc., if – I say – the yeoman enjoyed no other freedom from taxation; however, it is evident that this honorable citizen of the state fully compensated for what freedom from taxation which the state constitution may have granted him, by always being ready when the signal fires blazed and the bidding stick went around, to be ready [to bear arms].

This particular excerpt is articulated as a hypothetical conjecture and is followed by a series of rhetorical questions relating to the veracity of 'chronicles and ancient laws.' The veil of deniability is intact. The meaning, however, is clear: the ancient constitution gave the citizen a right of political representation, linked to taxation and military service.

<sup>40</sup> 'Lad derfor end Odelsbondens Skattefrihed have været anden, end den, der fulgte af Proprieteten, han besad, anden end den, at vilkaarlig Kongebud ikke kunde afnøde ham Skatten, den Vaabengnyet ikke havde vedtaget, anden end den stolte Rettighed, for Skatternes rigtige Anvendelse at kræve Regnskab af Statens Fogder, uden derfor at udsætte sig for Beskyldning af Dumdrigtig, Oprører o.s.v., om – siger jeg – Odelsbonden end nød anden Skattefrihed ; saa er det dog vist, at denne Statens høiagtbare Borger fuldelig gav Erstatning for hvad Skattefrihed, Statskonstitutionen maaskee tillagte ham, ved altid, naar Bavens Ild blussede og Budstikken gik om, at være rede.' G.L. Baden in Cornelius Tacitus, *Germaniens Beliggenhed*, pp. 36–9 n1 (p. 37).

As part of his argument against aristocratic privilege, G. L. Baden repeatedly touches on the ability of new men of non-noble birth to hold public offices, without entering cabals or indecent tricks.<sup>41</sup> In his discussion of the legal offices of state, G. L. Baden equates the Nordic 'Laugmænd' with popular tribunes (*tribuni plebis*), who 'without doubt' were tasked to defend the people's rights against royal power, in the 'democratic form of rule' in the ancient north.<sup>42</sup>

G. L. Baden's *Odelsbønder* transcend the debate about manorial rights. Liberty in the ancient north went beyond distribution of property and the absence of arbitrary aristocratic power. G. L. Baden describes a popular tribunate in the courts to ensure against the abuse of royal power, a right to participate in legislative process, hold public office and acquire a place at the rudder of state. This amounts to an ideal of participatory democracy, a division of powers and a circumscribed, legally responsible government.

### *A Pure Religion of Reason'*

G. L. Baden's treatment of the religion of the ancient north also runs against the grain of the text of the *Germania*. In a footnote on religious offices, Baden claims Tacitus is merely projecting Roman religion onto the Germans and is therefore not dependable. Baden equates Tacitus' placement of Isis and Hercules in *Germania* with 'scholars' who 'find Noah's ark or the staff of Moses and other Jewish traditions in Greek or Roman religion' or elements of Christian dogma in Plato or Aristotle.<sup>43</sup> This contains a sting against the neologist theology in favour in the 1790s.

G. L. Baden's redescription of ancient religion begins by a recounting that certain unnamed German scholars ('some of our brothers') regard it as unlikely that 'their and also our' ancestors had pagan idols, temples, or a priestly caste. Baden then describes Germanic religion as a 'higher and purer concept of religion than one could presume to find in a people without our sciences and culture.'

Later in the same footnote, G. L. Baden defines a pure religion of reason. G. L. Baden's primordial religion is a natural religion of virtue without priests and without supernatural beliefs in divine punishment or celestial rewards:

A pure religion of reason is founded only on the feeling of a virtue, which must be present without any hope of rewards or any fear of punishment; it is a proud thought,

<sup>41</sup> G.L. Baden in Cornelius Tacitus, *Germaniens Beliggenhed*, pp. 33–4 n2.

<sup>42</sup> G.L. Baden in Cornelius Tacitus, *Germaniens Beliggenhed*, p. 32 n5.

<sup>43</sup> G.L. Baden in Cornelius Tacitus, *Germaniens Beliggenhed*, pp. 11–13 n1.

difficult to live up to. However large and cultivated a reason, it nevertheless often yields to sensibility, and he who does not want to make allowance for the powerful impressions [of sensibility] in our civic institutions, does not understand humanity.<sup>44</sup>

Since sentiment is stronger than human reason, ‘superstition’ inevitably manifests itself in some form. The ancients were fallible as well, so Baden suspects that the ancient Germans may have set up temples to ‘certain virtuous ancestors’ who ‘embodied the virtues.’ Elsewhere, G. L. Baden redescribes the *sacerdotes* of ancient Germania as judges, not priests, respected only for their legal heft.<sup>45</sup>

Baden contrasts the sparse primordial Germanic religion favourably with the old Norse religion later introduced by the ‘third’ Odin. In this G. L. Baden draws on Suhm’s euhemeristic theory of three Odins, the last of which created a clerical caste in northern antiquity but was, according to G. L. Baden, unable to completely extinguish the wisdom of the ancients. The ancient religion of reason is only completely extinguished by the ‘wretched’ [‘usle’] Christian missionaries, who, it follows implicitly, introduced the Christian religious hierarchy and the darkest night of the Middle Ages, in this radical version of the enlightenment narrative.

G. L. Baden polemicizes explicitly against Christianity at several points in his redescription of Germanic religion. When Tacitus reports of human sacrifices among the Germanic tribes, Baden’s extensive footnote omits any mention of the famous descriptions of human sacrifices in Saxo and Adam of Bremen. He does, however, cite Caesar, who wrote that the Germans paid little regard to sacrifices, before writing that in his own view, ‘only prisoners of war and slaves who were criminals’ could have been sacrificed. Then G. L. Baden argues that this resembled the practice in contemporary Europe, because ‘many unjust and unseemly death penalties’ in fact are a form of human sacrifice. The temporal distance to the Germanic past is suspended to allow G. L. Baden to decry the Christian wars of religion:

What is the absurd sentence that ‘whoso sheddeth man’s blood, by man shall his blood be shed’ based upon, apart from the equally absurd thought sustained only by clerical pride that the Godhead would be pleased by an offer of unjustly shed blood? What is

<sup>44</sup> ‘Reen Fornuftreligion ene grundet paa Følelsen af en Dyd, der maa finde Sted, endog uden al Haab om Belønning, al Frygt for Straf, saa stolt at tænke sig, saa vanskelig dog nok at udøve – Fornuften være nok saa stor, nok saa kultiveret, alt for ofte maa den dog vige for Sandseligheden, hvis mægtige Indtryk ikke at ville tilstaae, i vore borgerlige Anlæg ikke at ville rette sig efter, er at miskiende Menneskeligheden.’ G.L. Baden in Cornelius Tacitus, *Germaniens Beliggenhed*, pp. 11–13 n1.

<sup>45</sup> G.L. Baden in Cornelius Tacitus, *Germaniens Beliggenhed*, p. 21 n3.

the pyre of the heretic's sacrifice? What do the proud and stupid zealots convince the simple-minded and unenlightened populace that such an inhuman procession is?<sup>46</sup>

The first sentence of this carefully worded passage read literally means that revenge against murderers is a form of human sacrifice, in words which closely paraphrase the Old Testament.<sup>47</sup> The second half suggests that any belief that the shedding of *innocent* blood would be pleasing to God is unreasonable. This can be understood as a rejection of the doctrine of atonement, arguably the central tenet of Christianity. The next couple of sentences is a rejection of the Church; G. L. Baden decries clerical zealots who trick the simple-minded populace into believing in such a human sacrifice. Baden's attack on the immorality of religion and priests evokes Lucretius, darling of the pagan enlightenment, who also resounds in G. L. Baden's idea of the power of nature.<sup>48</sup> The trope of expounding the 'immorality' of Judeo-Christian religion as human sacrifice recalls Voltaire and Holbach.<sup>49</sup>

The idea of the autochthonous nature of the Germans in *Germ.* 2–4 is given little attention. In a footnote, G. L. Baden first points to Schöningh, Suhm, Thunmann and Schlözer as the most learned experts on the origins of peoples, seeming to concede the Scythian origins of the Germans.

But does not much, if not all, depend on the prejudice inculcated in childhood by our faulty religious upbringing, as if Asia was the botanic nursery of all mankind, as if Nature's omnipotent Let-there-Be could not give every part of the earth and every province their own human beings, as it gave them their own animals?<sup>50</sup>

<sup>46</sup> 'Hvorpaa er vel den urimelige Sætning, at hvo som udøser sit Medmenneskes Blod, hans Blod skal igien udøses, grundet, uden paa den ligesaa urimelige ved Klerkestolthed underholdt Tanke, at Guddommen ved saadan skjønt uretfærdigt Blods Udgydelse bragtes et velbehageligt Offer? Ja hvad er Baalet, Kiætteren opofres paa? Hvilket Alherren behageligt Røggoffer indbilde ikke hine stolte som dumme Zeloter den enfoldige uoplyste Almue, et saadant umenneskeligt Optog er?' G.L. Baden in Cornelius Tacitus, *Germaniens Beliggenhed*, pp. 24–6 n2.

<sup>47</sup> 1 Mos. 9.6: 'Hvo som udøser menneskets blod, ved mennesket skal hans blod udøses; thi i Guds billede gjorde han mennesket.' *Biblia; Det er den ganske Høll. Skriftes Bøger ved Hans Kongl. Majests. vor allernaadigste Arve-Herres Kong Christian Den Syvendes Med Flid og efter Grund-Texten efterseete og rettede; saa og med mange Paralleller og udførlige Summarier forsynede*, 12th edn (Kjøbenhavn: Gerhard Giese Salikath, 1780).

<sup>48</sup> Titus Lucretius Carus, *De rerum natura* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1975), esp. Book I, verse 62–101.

<sup>49</sup> For example 'Jephté. ou des sacrifices de sang humain' in Voltaire, *Dictionnaire philosophique* (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale Éditions, 1994), p. 305; Paul Henri Thiry d'Holbach, *Le bon sens du cure Meslier, suivi de Son testament* (Paris, 1930), p. 132.

<sup>50</sup> 'Men beroer ikke, om ei Alt, saa Meget paa den, ved vor feilfulde Religionsopdragelse lettelig i Barndommen inddrukne Fordom, som var Asien det ganske Mennekeskiøns Planteskole, som kunde Naturens almægtige Bliv ikke give hver Jorddeel og hver Egn sine Mennekes, som det gav den sine Dyr?' G.L. Baden in Cornelius Tacitus, *Germaniens Beliggenhed*, p. 8 n1.



Baden's criticism of the prevalent immigration theory is an attack on the religious politics of the historians who argue that the cradle of all peoples was in the east, based ultimately on biblical authority. This is troubling, because G. L. Baden's description of Odin's religion builds on Suhm's immigration theory. This particularly crass inconsistency in the historical argument is perhaps a reason to view the esoteric criticism of Judaeo-Christian religion as a central motive in Baden's translation of *Germania*.

G. L. Baden's treatment of ancient religion amounts to a claim that the ancient Danes were less susceptible to 'superstition' and the rule of priests than other peoples, even if the ancients did not fully conform to the 'pure religion of reason' which Baden clearly regards as the ideal.<sup>51</sup> The historiography tends to downplay the existence of a radical Enlightenment in Denmark-Norway, emphasising that contemporary pamphleteers like Frederik Wedel-Jarlsberg and Niels Ditlev Riegels largely articulated their criticism of the ecclesiastical order from a viewpoint of protestant Christian Enlightenment.<sup>52</sup> They provoked harsh criticism and calls for censorship from leading clerics, and participants in the debate were described as atheists decades later.<sup>53</sup> G. L. Baden's criticism of revealed religion and the worldly editorial response his *Germania*-translation elicited in *Kjøbenhavns Lærde Efterretninger*, which I will detail in the next section, certainly begs the question of the prevalence of esoteric Enlightenment deism or atheism in Copenhagen.<sup>54</sup>

### *The reception of the 'Danicized Tacitus'*

The immediate reception of G. L. Baden's translation may serve to further illuminate the methods of oblique writing in the limited public sphere of the mid-1790s.

<sup>51</sup> G.L. Baden in Cornelius Tacitus, *Germaniens Beliggenhed*, pp. 11–13 n1.

<sup>52</sup> Frederik Vilhelm Wedel-Jarlsberg, *Den geistlige stand bør afskaffes. Frimodig Svar paa Doct. og Confession. C. Bastholms offentlig fremsatte Spørgsmaale. Denne tilegnet* (Kjøbenhavn: Christian Frederik Holm, 1795), pp. 127–32; Johnsen, 'I Klios forgård'; Arne Bugge Amundsen and Henning Laugerud, *Norsk frietenkerhistorie 1500–1850* (Oslo: Humanist forl., 2001), pp. 250–273. Scandinavia is typically absent in the global survey in Jonathan Israel, *Democratic enlightenment: philosophy, revolution, and human rights 1750–1790* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

<sup>53</sup> For instance the polemics of Nic. E. Balle or Chr. Bastholm analysed by Amundsen and Laugerud. For a call for self-restraint to avert censorship, see Frederik Münter, *Tanker om den i Dagens Blade herskende Tone* (Kjøbenhavn: N. Møller og Søn, 1796). For the view from a distance, see for instance Anonymous, 'Nekrolog. Knud Lyne Rahbek', *Dansk Literatur-Tidende*, (1830). The obituary was almost certainly written by the leading theologians Peter Erasmus Müller or Jens Møller.

<sup>54</sup> The analysis draws on Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment: The Rise of Modern Paganism* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1966).

The younger Baden's doings in 1795 were eagerly reported by the prominent weekly intellectual literary journal *Kjøbenhavnske Lærde Efterretninger*, which also provided a four-page review of the translation of the *Germania*.

*Lærde Efterretninger* was the academic newspaper of record. It was edited by the historian Rasmus Nyerup (1759–1829). The journal reprinted précis and commented on works by Peter Andreas Heiberg and Malte Conrad Brun, the *bêtes noires* of the Danish commentariat, giving a pulse of the more pronounced criticism at the fringes for the bourgeois readers of Copenhagen. While 'moderate' editors like Nyerup largely avoided making direct criticism of the government in the way Riegels, Brun and Heiberg did elsewhere, the sympathies of the journal on the main questions of reform were undoubted.<sup>55</sup>

The anonymous review of G. L. Baden's translation began with a rather curious turn of phrase:<sup>56</sup>

The evil Demon which often, with greater or lesser influence, has hovered over Danish literature, and strangled so many noble works at birth, also long ago stopped the Danicized Tacitus, of which Prof. Baden so fortunately gave us the Annals. Here the son, Dr. Baden, gives us a piece by the same author. A piece, which for the lovers of the History of the Fatherland is very important; and, as one sees in the accompanying notes, the translator himself is such a lover.

The reviewer gave two short excerpts from the translation, suggestively noting that the text was about the Danes and describing the fabrication of the cult of the Goddess Herta by the priestly caste. The reviewer then again draws the readers' attention towards the footnotes, which 'show erudition and enlightenment' and 'give [the readers] occasion to find things in Tacitus which they had not thought of before.' As a parting suggestion, the reviewer points out that 'perhaps some readers will ask whether the translation was the most useful place for this eagerness of expression?' The reader must of course ask himself why the 'Danicized Tacitus' could run up against 'the evil Demon' of censorship: The review is itself a work of oblique writing. The reviewer invites a reading between the lines, tells the reader

<sup>55</sup> See Rasmus Nyerup, *Professor og Ridder Rasmus Nyerups Levnetsløb* (Kjøbenhavn: Reitzel, 1829), pp. 36–9 and 48–51.

<sup>56</sup> 'Den onde Dæmon der stedse, med større eller mindre Indflydelse, har svævet over den danske Literatur, og qvalt saa mangt et ædelt Værk i Fødselen, fik ogsaa for længe siden standset den fordanskede Tacitus, af hvilken Prof. Baden saa heldigen gav os Annalerne. Her giver Sønnen Dr. Baden os et Stykke af samme Auktor. Et Stykke, som for Fædrelandets Histories Elskere er heelt vigtigt ; og, som man seer af de hosføjede Noter, er Oversætteren selv en saadan Elsker.' Anonymous, 'Cajus Cornelius Tacitus om Germaniens Beliggenhed, Sæder og folkeslag. Af det latinske med Anmerkninger ved Dr. Gustav Ludvig Baden', *Kjøbenhavnske lærde Efterretninger for Aar 1795*, No. 32, pp. 509–11 (p. 509).

that the note apparatus was worth a closer inspection, and hints at a critique of religion and aristocracy.

While largely restrained in his editorial policies, Rasmus Nyerup was like G. L. Baden a proponent of the radical enlightenment in Denmark-Norway. Both men were on occasion staunchly anti-clerical. Nyerup was fined, judicially harassed and removed as editor of *Lærde Efterretninger* in 1801, in part because he argued in a statistical survey of Copenhagen that the theological professorships at the university should be subsumed to history, ‘as knowledge of the obfuscation of reason.’<sup>57</sup>

It is certainly true, as John Pocock and Michael Printy have pointed out, that philosophical historiography by the end of the eighteenth century had become a major vehicle for confessionalism, to an extent superseding theology.<sup>58</sup> This is particularly the case in the 1790s, as Gallican and Protestant writers in Northern Europe sought to calm the storms of the most radical revolutionary years by reinvigorating religious life. Erik Sidenvall’s examination of five major historiographers from Sweden’s Age of Liberty demonstrates the importance of confessionalising historiography in eighteenth-century Sweden, and the prevailing comparative strength of pietism and orthodoxy has been the subject of recent scholarship.<sup>59</sup> Leading contemporary theologians like Frederik Münter and Christian Bastholm wrote radically different confessionalising histories in Denmark. This posits confessionalism for consideration as a possible interpretation in G. L. Baden’s case as well.

Far from being a confessionalising protestant, however, G. L. Baden’s arguments against revealed religion provides an instance of the non-confessional undercurrent theorised by Heinz Schilling as an important impetus towards the gradual secularisation and dissolution of confessionalism.<sup>60</sup> Later in his authorship, G. L. Baden’s anti-clericalism became equally polemical and contemptuous, regardless

<sup>57</sup> ‘[...] Theologien, der gjerne kunde være en Underafdeling af Historien, (som Kundskab om den menneskelige Forstands Forvildelser) [...]’. Rasmus Nyerup, *Kjøbenhavns Beskrivelse* (Kjøbenhavn: Johan Frederik Schultz paa Proft & Storchs Forlag, 1800), pp. 296–7.

<sup>58</sup> Michael Printy, ‘The Reformation of the Enlightenment: German Histories in the Eighteenth Century’, in *Politics and Reformation: Histories and Reformations*, ed. by Christopher Ocker, Michael Printy, Peter Starenko and Peter Wallace (Boston: Brill, 2007), pp. 135–53. [Crossref](#); J. G. A. Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion*, 6 vols (Cambridge University Press, 1999–2015), V: *Religion: the First Triumph* (2011). [Crossref](#)

<sup>59</sup> Erik Sidenvall, ‘Förnuftets och teologins kritik: Ett bidrag till förståelsen av frihetstidens historieskrivning’, *Svenskt historisk tidskrift* (2019), pp. 223–50; Johannes Ljungberg and Erik Sidenvall, *Religious Enlightenment in the eighteenth-century Nordic countries: Reason and orthodoxy* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2023). [Crossref](#)

<sup>60</sup> Heinz Schilling, ‘The confessionalization of European churches and societies: an engine for modernizing and for social and cultural change’, *Norsk teologisk tidsskrift*, 110 (2009), 3–16. [Crossref](#)

of whether he describes Catholic or reformed clergy, medieval, post-reformation or contemporary. His writing contained a clear line of argument against revealed religion; to the extent we can know from his writing, G. L. Baden seems more of a deist than an atheist.<sup>61</sup> Untypically for the period, G. L. Baden eschewed his reserve and became, in the 1820s, an outspoken and strident public critic of revealed religion, ridiculing both the charismatic pastor Grundtvig and his high church opponents, and was repeatedly punished with fines and censorship. G. L. Baden's and Nyerup's radical dissent are instances of the shortcomings suggested by Eva Krause Jørgensen of applying confessionalization as a singular theory for explaining religious strife in Scandinavia in the late eighteenth century.<sup>62</sup>

The blatant lie that Jacob Baden's translation of Tacitus had been stopped by the censor was soon contradicted both in *Lærde Efterretninger* and in Baden's own *Universitets-Journal* by the professor's invitation to subscribe to a new translation of the *Histories* and the minor works, including *Germania*. The Crown Prince-Regent had repeatedly encouraged Jacob Baden to publish his translation, the invitation began; it would surely garner greater interest with the public now than in the quieter age of his 1783 edition of the *Annals*, since the Roman historian is 'on the lips of the politician and the man of business' as well as the scholar. The long invitation to subscribe in *Universitets-Journal* similarly contained several extracts: the locus classicus of 'black Tacitists' in *Histories* lauding the combination of monarchy with liberty of thought under Nerva, and the exhortation of the doomed Otho to his nephew to submit to Vespasian to ensure public order.<sup>63</sup>

Jacob Baden had founded the journal in 1793, in part to provide a counterweight to *Lærde Efterretninger*. The editor of *Universitets-Journal* used Tacitist reason of state in his firm stance against the government 'taking refuge in middling or palliative politics' and against polemicists who seek to 'weaken the force of government' and 'speak for human rights and expand bourgeois freedom.' Jacob Baden wanted to 'give courage to regents to exercise their duty to govern, even if they lose some of their love with the class of people who find their benefit in spinelessness and anarchy.'<sup>64</sup>

<sup>61</sup> Note for instance articles on 'Den danske og norske Cleri Indflydelse paa Lovgivningen' and 'Atheisme' in the second volume of the encyclopedic articles on church history: Gustav Ludvig Baden, *Smaa Afhandlinger og Bemærkninger Fornemmelig i Fædrenelandets, Middelalderens og den Christne Kirkes Historie*, 2 vols (Kjøbenhavn: Beekens Forlag, 1821–4), II (1824).

<sup>62</sup> Eva Krause Jørgensen, 'Den nordiske oplysning og 1700-tallet i et konfessionskulturelt perspektiv', *Sjulttonhundredatal*, 15 (2018), 138–44. [Crossref](#)

<sup>63</sup> Jacob Baden, 'Prøve paa en Oversættelse af Tacitus Historiebøger', *Kjøbenhavns Universitets-Journal*, 3 (1795), 178–82.

<sup>64</sup> Anonymous, 'Over det berygtede Valsprog; oderint dum metuant; Lad dem længe nok hade, naar de frygte. Oversat af Wielands Neuer deutscher Mercur, März 1795', *Kjøbenhavns Universitets-Journal*, 3 (1796), 112–4.

*Jacob Baden's historical barbarians*

Jacob Baden's translation makes a pronounced claim of faithfulness to Tacitus' text. With a sceptical subtext, Jacob Baden noted in his preface that French, German and English historians had competed to 'reinforce and illuminate' Tacitus' information about their own nations from *Germania*, and that Suhm and 'my son, Gustav Ludvig Baden' similarly had tried to make it relevant to the understanding of Danish prehistory. Jacob Baden justified his own translation on the grounds that the son's translation was difficult to get hold of and only in the form of a contribution to a magazine with many 'heterodox opinions.' Jacob Baden warns against the 'poetic licences and willed ambiguities' of Tacitus, 'who seems to give his readers more to understand than he seems to have said to them.'<sup>65</sup>

In his more reserved use of footnotes, Jacob Baden primarily tries to assist the legibility of the text. Baden senior discusses and utilises other translations, primarily that of the French translator Abbé Gabriel Brottier. Most of G. L. Baden's footnotes are omitted. Some are selected and included by Jacob Baden and marked with the initials GLB. These relate the text somewhat to northern antiquity. This usage marks out *Germania* among the other translations in Baden's collected works. In the rest of the corpus, Baden overwhelmingly uses footnotes as a reference system to increase the legibility of Tacitus by pointing the reader to relevant information contained *elsewhere in the text*, and for the clarification of linguistic choices. As a rule, Jacob Baden gives little factual information or interpretative gloss.

At certain points, largely related to the fraught questions of aristocracy and religion, Jacob *explicitly* contradicts arguments made by G. L. Baden. This contradiction typically takes the form of a reference to Tacitus' text. Unlike his son, Baden argues that Tacitus' description of the credulous belief in omens among the Germans was probably truthful. The priests were priests, not merely judges. Senior corrects the son on 'the class of outstanding citizens,' pragmatically pointing out that *the nobles are there in Tacitus' text*. The dialogue between the two translations is not verbose, because senior omits the more radical parts of junior's polemic. With few strokes, G. L. Baden's anti-aristocratic and anti-Christian polemic is bereaved any historical credibility.

While there are some instances of interpreting Tacitus in light of the Norse literature,<sup>66</sup> there is no mention of the politically potent 'Ting' or 'Odelsbonde' in Jacob Baden's translation. The conceptual vocabulary employed in the translation lends itself to a further othering of the inhabitants of *Germania* than G. L. Baden's

<sup>65</sup> J. Baden, 'Fortale', in Cornelius Tacitus, *Tacitus af det Latinske*, III, p. IV.

<sup>66</sup> J. Baden in Cornelius Tacitus, *Tacitus af det Latinske*, III, for example p. 532 n16, p. 562 n73.

translation: Rather than ‘Fyrster’, princes, Baden senior writes about ‘Høvdinge’, chieftains. Jacob Baden’s vocabulary emphasizes the description of the barbarians in Germania as primitives.

Jacob Baden is sceptical about garnering certain knowledge of the ancient ethnic geography from *Germania*, but decisively exfoliates the Danish-Norwegian geography from the loose descriptions of the *Germania*. The situation of the temple island is uncertain in his account. Baden Sr. cautiously points towards Heligoland at the mouth of the Elbe, but he firmly rules out Zeeland.<sup>67</sup> Since the inhabitants of the holy places of Germania are situated further from the Danish heartlands, Tacitus is less important for understanding even the *ancient* mores of the Danes.

In contrast to his son, Jacob Baden does not skirt the negative characteristics of the Germans. In a footnote to chapter fifteen, where Tacitus wrote about the laziness of the German nobles when not hunting or warring, Jacob Baden almost waxes poetic in describing the *otherness* of the barbarians.

Nothing curious in this, says Brottier: ‘with Barbarians everything is extremes : peace war : action inaction : love hate : no moderation.’ The cause is that they are governed more by impulse than by reason.’<sup>68</sup>

In contrast to civilized man in the enlightened present, the barbarians of the distant forests of ancient Germany were ruled by their passions, not their reason. The anthropological otherness of the barbarian ancient is the consistent thread in Jacob Baden’s interpretation of the work. Consequently, any possible relevance of the *Germania* to contemporary politics fades.

Jacob Baden senior is cautious in interpreting the details of the *Germania* as historically factual and relevant to Nordic antiquity. This is evident from the cautionary note in the preface, but also from the comparatively small number of footnotes which link the text to the north, all of which are ascribed to ‘GLB.’ While largely an argument by omission, on occasion Jacob Baden pokes fun at the broad tradition of Nordic historiography. He ridicules the identification of the pillars of Hercules with Lindesnæs and Skagen, a touchstone of Danish-Norwegian historiography, adding that ‘Ordinarily, ancient peoples who lived by the sea imagined the Pillars of Hercules at the outer limits of the landscape.’<sup>69</sup> Culminating in this polemical and historicizing footnote, the learned classical philologist distanced

<sup>67</sup> J. Baden in Cornelius Tacitus, *Tacitus af det Latinske*, III, p. 581 n133.

<sup>68</sup> ‘Intet besynderlig heri, siger Brottier: “hos Barbarer er Alt Extremer : Fred Krig : Bevægelse Uvirksomhed : Kiærlighed Had : ingen Maade.” Aarsagen er, fordi de styres mere af Huskud, end Fornuft.’ J. Baden in Cornelius Tacitus, *Tacitus af det Latinske*, III, p. 549 n49.

<sup>69</sup> J. Baden in Cornelius Tacitus, *Tacitus af det Latinske*, III, p. 572 n101.

himself from his contemporaries Suhm and Schøning as well as the older tradition of Danish historiography.<sup>70</sup> It provides a glimpse of an argument against relying on the *Germania* as a source for northern prehistory. Suhm and Schøning had interpreted the mores described in the text as barbaric and historically distant. To them, it represented not a golden age, but an early stage of their unfolding enlightenment narratives. In distinct ways both had treated *Germania* as a reference point which lent credibility to their chronologies and the ‘domestic’ sources they privileged in their hierarchy of textual sources.

Baden’s temporality is stable, and provides the foundation for a consistent, historicizing mode of argument. The perlocutionary effect of Jacob Baden’s historicization of Tacitus *Germania* follows not from a pointed rebuttal of oblique arguments for republican liberty or a religion of reason. The denouement of barbaric *Germania* and the weakening of its links to Nordic pre-history discredits the golden age as a possible instrument for reasoning about civil liberty. The politics of historiography manifest in this exchange demonstrate that the authoritative historical criticism of an important source by an experienced classical philologist at the pinnacle of the learned profession was no simple academic exercise. Profound historicization functioned as a conservative rhetorical strategy, directed at G. L. Baden’s republican utopia, but also against other ‘ancient constitutionalisms’ using Tacitus in the discourse of the 1790s. The future could no longer credibly reside in the distant past.

### *Concluding remarks*

G. L. Baden remained an unrepentant radical and rejoiced in the French revolution even in old age. His influential and innovative handbooks for Danish and Norwegian history contained watered-down versions of the theory of primordial popular liberty traceable in his version of *Germania*. G. L. Baden became the first Danish historian to reject pre-history as a topic for historiography, beginning the first volume of *Danmarks Riges Historie* (1830) with the Jellinge Stone and Gorm the Old.

Tacitus was a common reference in the political discourse of the revolutionary period in Denmark–Norway. Tacitism functioned as a vehicle for political thought and instruction, not least for containing controversial topics, including republicanism and a secularizing language of politics. Scholarship on Danish–Norwegian Tacitism is underdeveloped, and further research is clearly warranted.

<sup>70</sup> Schøning, ‘Afhandling om de gamle Grækere’, pp. 269–72. More vaguely Peter Friderich Suhm, *Om de Nordiske Folks ældste Oprindelse* (Kjøbenhavn: Brødrene Johan Christian og Georg Christopher Berling, 1770), pp. 173–8. See also Suhm, *Om Odin*, pp. 189–90.

G. L. Baden's primordial vision in *Germania* was a particularly radical version of the narrative of the popular liberty of Northern antiquity. By tracing G. L. Baden's commentary in the translation and the note apparatus, a primordial politics of popular liberty emerges – broadly speaking, a participatory, neo-Roman or republican late-enlightenment political liberty. To a remarkable extent, the primordial utopianism of G. L. Baden's translation is both egalitarian and anti-religious: The 'ancient liberty stirring in the forests of Germania' radically outpace related variants of the ancient constitution of 'Odelsbønder' in late enlightenment Denmark-Norway. It diverges from Tyge Rothe's *Nordens Staetsforfatning* (1781–2), which is often cited as the main work in this historiographical tradition, in its radical views on property, citizenship, monarchy and religion.

G. L. Baden's rhetorical redescription of Tacitus to convey his radical politics is an instance of esoteric writing, drawing on classical rhetoric and the long tradition of the learned republic. It elicited a response from other actors in the public sphere which indicate that 'the rules of the game' were understood in academic circles, and that an oblique historiography directed at a narrow stratum remained a possible strategy for radical political communication in Denmark-Norway in the late 1790s. While limited to oblique argument, it foreshadows the historical arguments about ancient liberty which were prevalent at the Norwegian revolutionary moment in 1814.

The systematic historicity of Jacob Baden is interesting as an instance where a modern view of the past as foreign and anthropologically other served a purpose in conservative speech acts. As such it may fall into a broader Western European pattern of conservative historians and polemicists in the revolutionary decade who employed historicization as a defence against utopianism and revolution.

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