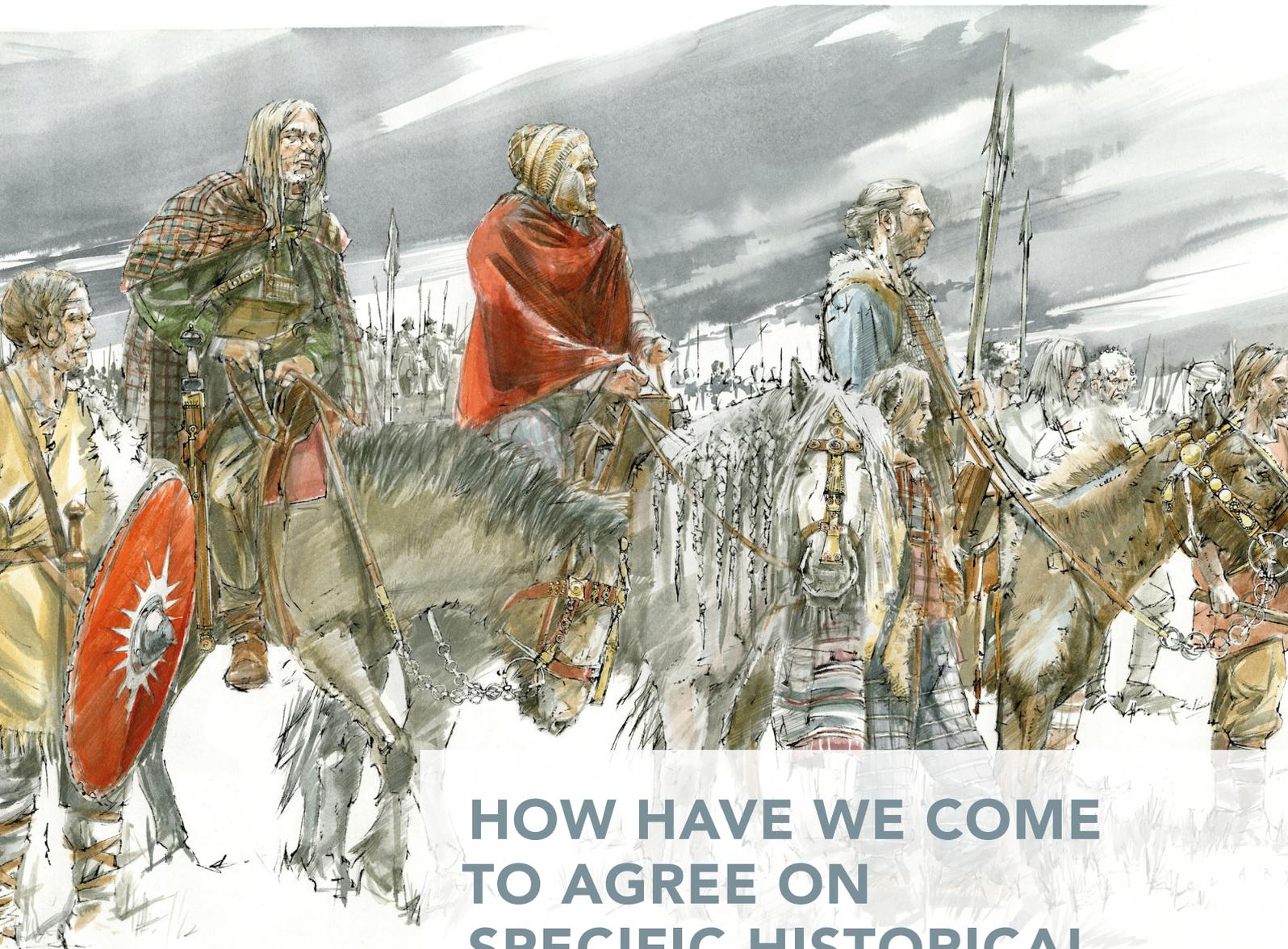


EDUCATIONAL MATERIALS FOR SCHOOLS
"GERMANIC TRIBES. ARCHAEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES"



**HOW HAVE WE COME
TO AGREE ON
SPECIFIC HISTORICAL
REPRESENTATIONS?**

Exhibition

September 2020 until March 2021 in the Museum of
Prehistory and Early History, Berlin; May to October 2021,
LVR-LandesMuseum Bonn.



Image 1: Drawing that claims to "reconstruct"
Before the Battle.

Benoît Clarys, 2020

Germanic tribes in battle could have looked like those in this depiction. How do historians and archaeologists know what that might be? And how does a drawing like the one above come together?

This “reconstruction” drawing was commissioned for the exhibition “Germanic Tribes. Archaeological Perspectives” in 2020. We have to approach it critically, particularly taking into account the way in which it was produced. One of the exhibition’s curators selected archaeological objects and written sources, then asked the artist to render them into a coherent picture of what Germanic warriors could have looked like. The subjective curatorial choice of sources and the artist’s style affect how we perceive of Germanic warriors through this picture.

Curator

A curator is a museum professional who collects objects, researches them, and decides what to put on display in exhibitions.

i

”

Excerpts from Tacitus’ Germania, which the artist and the curator used for information about Germanic tribes

Tacitus, Germania 4: *“Hence, too, the same physical peculiarities throughout so vast a population. All have fierce blue eyes, red hair, huge frames, fit only for a sudden exertion.”*

Tacitus, Germania 6: *“But few use swords or long lances. They carry a spear [...], with a narrow and short head [...]. As for the horse-soldier, he is satisfied with a shield and spear; the foot-soldiers also scatter showers of missiles, each man having several and hurling them to an immense distance and being naked or lightly clad with a little cloak. There is no display about their equipment: their shields alone are marked with very choice colors. A few only have corslets, and just one or two here and there a metal or leather helmet.”*

Tacitus, Germania 6: *“Their horses are remarkable neither for beauty nor for fleetness.”*

Tacitus

Tacitus was an important Roman historian and orator. He published a work called *Germania* in 98 CE, in which he described how “the” Germanic tribes lived around the first century CE. His text is regarded as the most important written account of Germanic tribes. However, it should be read carefully, bearing in mind that Tacitus himself had never visited Germania or the regions where Germanic tribes lived. We also do not know the sources he used for his work. What we do know is that he did not intend to publish a neutral description of Germanic tribes, but that he had political interests in mind: He juxtaposed the decadent and corrupt Roman society of his time with Germanic tribes, which he cast as noble.

i

Tacitus, Germania 17: *“They all wrap themselves in a cloak which is fastened with a clasp, or, if this is not forthcoming, with a thorn, leaving the rest of their persons bare. They pass whole days on the hearth by the fire. [...] They also wear the skins of wild beasts.”*

Images of archaeological finds that the artist used as models:



Image 2: Face Mask, found in the Thorsberg Moors.

Museum für Archäologie Schloss Gottorf, Landesmuseum Schleswig Holstein.



Image 3: Horse harness, found in the Thorsberg Moors.

Museum für Archäologie Schloss Gottorf, Landesmuseum Schleswig Holstein. Reconstruction by Nina Lau.



Image 4: Spearhead, found in Papendorf.

media Moesgaard, Rógvi. Photo: N. Johansen.



Image 5: Textiles, found in the Feddersen Wierde settlement.

Niedersächsisches Institut für historische Küstenforschung, Wilhelmshaven. Photo: R. Kiepe.



Image 6: Shield boss, found in the Tomb of Gommern.

Landesamt für Denkmalpflege und Archäologie Sachsen-Anhalt. Photo: Andrea Hörentrup.



Image 7: Hilt, found in the Thorsberg Moors.

Museum für Archäologie Schloss Gottorf, Landesmuseen Schleswig-Holstein.

? Activities

- 1 Look at the drawing in image 1 and find the objects in images 2–7. Describe how the objects are arranged and what the individual people are doing.
- 2 Compare the objects, individuals, and actions depicted in the drawing with the photographs of the archaeological finds and the excerpts by Tacitus. Which elements of the drawing are based on archaeological and historical sources, which ones are assumptions, and which ones are fantasy?
- 3 Discuss why the artist has included archaeological finds from several different excavations in this one scene.
- 4 Describe the impression of Germanic tribes that this image constructs for you.
- 5 Discuss to what extent this drawing is representative of the spirit of its time: Would an artist have drawn Germanic tribes in the same manner 100 years ago? Why or why not? Research and find other images and compare the different eras of historical representation.