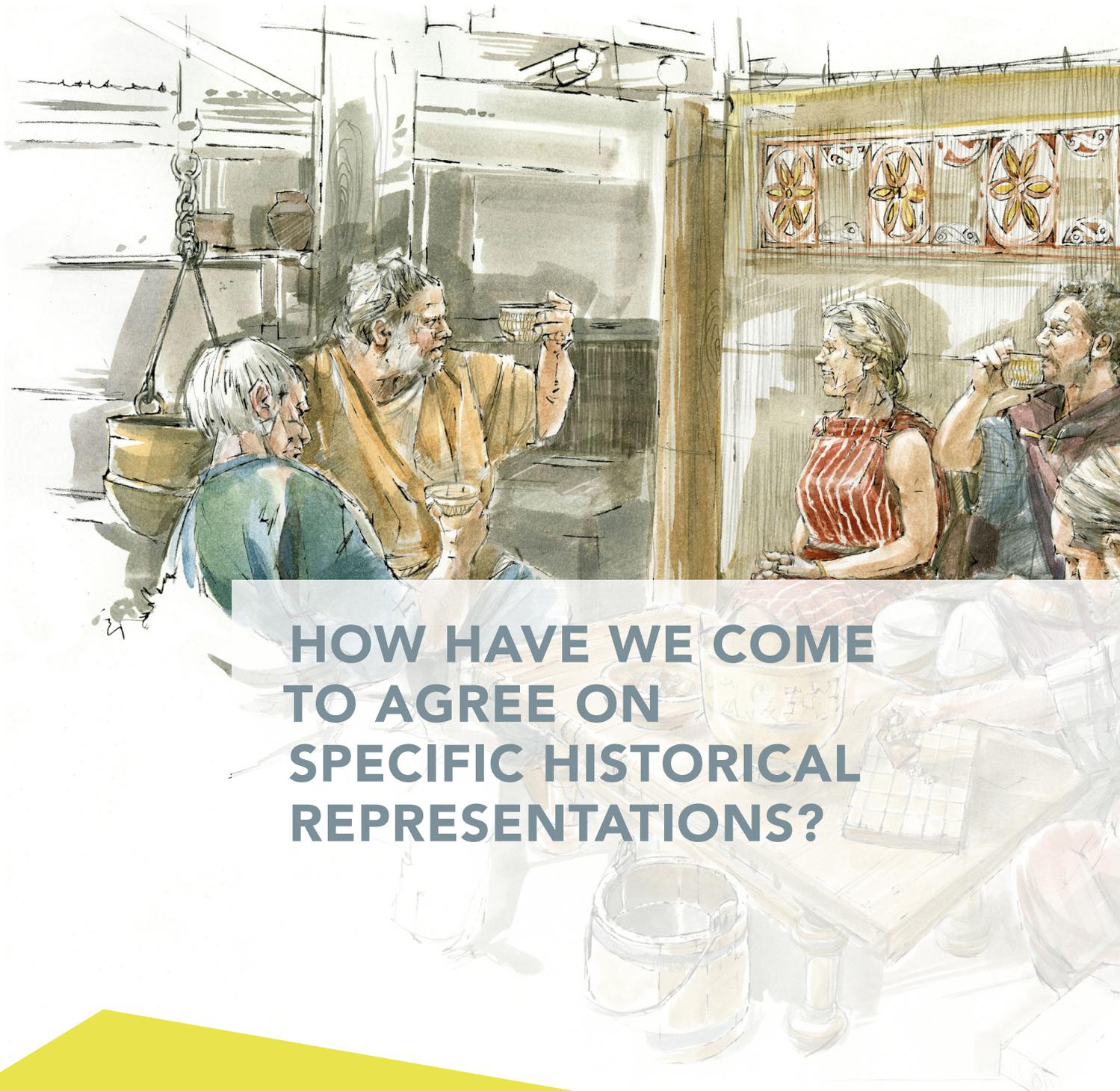


EDUCATIONAL MATERIALS FOR SCHOOLS
"GERMANIC TRIBES. ARCHAEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES"



**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" Revelry.
Benoît Clarys, 2020

This drawing shows a get-together in a Germanic house. How do we know whether it really looked like this, and how does an image like this come into being?

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 drinking and gambling in a Germanic settlement could have looked like. The subjective curatorial choice of sources and the artist’s style affect how we perceive of a gathering like this.

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 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.”*

Tacitus, Germania 17: *“The women have the same dress as the men, except that they generally wrap themselves in linen garments, which they embroider with purple, and do not lengthen out the upper part of their clothing into sleeves. The upper and lower arm is thus bare, and the nearest part of the bosom is also exposed.”*

Tacitus, Germania 21: *“No nation indulges more profusely in entertainments and hospitality. To exclude any human being from their roof is thought impious; every German, according to his means, receives his guest with a well-furnished table.”*

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 24: *“Strangely enough, they make games of hazard a serious occupation even when sober, and so venturesome are they about gaining or losing, that, when every other resource has failed, on the last and final throw they stake the freedom of their own person.”*

Images of archaeological finds that the artist used as models:



Image 2: Pail, found in Hemmoor.
Landesmuseum Hannover. Foto: K. Schmid.



Image 3: Wooden pail, found in Gotha.
Thüringisches Landesamt für Denkmalpflege und Archäologie. Photo: H. Arnold.



Image 4: Wooden bowl, found in the Feddersen Wierde settlement.
Zentrum für Baltische und Skandinavische Archäologie, Stiftung Schleswig-Holsteinische Landesmuseen, Schloss Gottorf.



Image 5: Glass bowl, found in a grave of a man.
Thüringisches Landesamt für Denkmalpflege und Archäologie Weimar – Museum für Ur- und Frühgeschichte Thüringens.



Image 6: Hilt, found in the Thorsberg Moors.
Museum für Archäologie Schloss Gottorf, Landesmuseen Schleswig-Holstein.



Image 7: Dress clasp, found in Emersleben.
Stadt Halberstadt, Städtisches Museum. Photo: C. Klein.

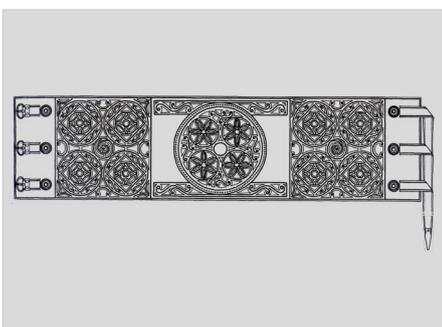


Image 8: Reconstructive drawing of a splendor belt, found in Gommern.
Drawing: Karol Schauer.



Interview with the Curator who commissioned the drawing:

Why did you decide to have four men and one woman depicted in this scene of drinking and gambling?

Well, of course it could also have been very different. We don't really know on which occasions members of tribes came together to drink, and how women and men took part in it. Written sources and archaeological objects, though, allow us to infer a likely scene. Consulting Tacitus, we read that it was rather men who drank. Furthermore, his texts suggest that men and women enjoyed a comparable social status. Archaeological objects like cups and bowls, however, were found predominantly in the graves of men and very rarely as grave goods for women. That's why there are more men than women in this picture—but we wanted to include a woman.

How did you come to feature this kind of ornamental wall hanging? Do you think that Germanic tribes really decorated their longhouses like that?

The ornamental wall hanging is an assumption. It is based on the pattern of a belt, which was found in Gommern in Saxony-Anhalt, in a Germanic settlement dating back to the third century of the common era. My hypothesis is that there were ornamental wall hangings in Germanic longhouses, because I and other archaeologists cannot imagine that the walls remained bare. As a warming element, for example, these wall hangings would have made a lot of sense.



Activities

- 1 Look at the drawing in image 1 and find the objects in images 2–8. Describe how the objects are arranged and what the individual people are doing.
- 2 Which sources served as the basis for the artist's drawing?
- 3 Compare the objects, individuals, and actions depicted in the drawing with the photographs of the archaeological finds, the excerpts by Tacitus, and the curator's statements in the interview. Which elements of the drawing are based on archaeological and historical sources, which ones are assumptions, and which ones are fantasy?
- 4 Come up with your own interpretations of the objects and texts and choose one of the following tasks: (1) Draw an alternative scene, featuring the objects in images 2–8, bearing in mind Tacitus' quotes, or (2) write a letter to the curator of the exhibition and discuss the gender roles in this image.