Kevni viro carissimo tolerabilissimoque et familiae meae
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THE INTERACTION OF BIOGRAPHY AND ETHNOGRAPHY IN TACITUS’ *AGRICOLA*

By

Hardai Soraya Patricia Jadoo

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Chair: Victoria E. Pagán
Major: Latin

In this thesis, I explore the combination of the generic elements of ancient biography and ethnography in Tacitus’ *Agricola*. Though most modern scholars classify the *Agricola* as biography, the inclusion of the extended ethnographic description of ancient Britain found in chapters 10-12 of the work, have led some scholars to question the overall literary merit of the work. Although most often described as a “digression,” the chapters that introduce the ethnography of Britain contain themes that are integral to the overall portrait of Tacitus’ father—in-law as a virtuous man, worthy of emulation. These two genres, although seemingly disparate, actually complement each other by providing necessary context to appreciate the most important political role in Agricola’s life, the governorship of Britain.

By tracing the tradition of Greco-Roman biography, I will show how this flexible genre readily admits elements from other genres within it. The tradition of ancient ethnography is also explored to show how Tacitus uses the conventions of this literary genre to introduce themes that have direct bearing on Agricola’s characterization. The ethnography serves as a mirror in which the character and deeds of Agricola are reflected. Moreover, the allusions he creates by recalling the ethnographic traditions of his literary predecessors such as Sallust, Caesar, and Livy, create an intertextual situation which lends weight to Tacitus’ account and through associations with
venerable figures of the Roman past, such as Caesar himself. Thus, the apparent ethnographic “digression” instead of detracting from the purpose of the work, aids in the characterization of Agricola and is an integral part of his biography. This interaction gives the reader a more thorough and unique portrayal of Agricola that biography alone could not provide.
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

In their commentary on the *Agricola*, Richard Ogilvie and Ian Richmond plainly assert that Tacitus’ *memoria* to his father-in-law is first and foremost a biography and make the following statement: “Tacitus makes it plain that he has set out to write a life of his father-in-law in the accustomed manner [of ancient biography].”¹ If we are to accept this assertion that Tacitus’ earliest work follows the literary genre of biography, what then are we to make of what is arguably the most famous part of his *opus*, namely the discursion on the ethnographical details and geography of first century Britain? Scholars have pondered this question with various opinions about the matter. Ogilvie and Richmond call the geographical information on Britain contained in the *Agricola* “largely incidental.”² Woodhead calls the nature of the whole work a *laudatio* of a dead relative.³ Anderson discusses the debate that casts the *Agricola* as political pamphlet against Domitian’s reign.⁴ Conte notes the composite character of the Agricola stating that it is situated at the intersection of several literary genres and shows the heavy influence of a historical style.⁵ One noteworthy scholar, F.R.D. Goodyear in his contribution to *The Cambridge History of Classical Literature*, finds the success of the work “questionable” because of the amalgamation of the various generic elements:

[Tacitus] gives roughly two thirds of the work to Agricola’s governorship of Britain, and treats the climax of Agricola’s campaigns at length, providing direct speeches for the two

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¹ Ogilvie and Richmond 1967: 11.
² Ogilvie and Richmond 1967: 31; 35.
³ Woodhead 1948.
⁴ Furneaux and Anderson 1922: xxviii.
⁵ Conte 1994: 533.
leaders, almost as if he were experimenting with full-scale history. Such extensive
development of a part...unbalances the whole.6

It is clear that the composite nature of the Agricola with its seemingly disparate generic elements
has led some to call into question Tacitus’ purpose and the overall literary merit of the work.
Throughout the narrative, however, one theme dominates: the life and deeds of its main
character, Agricola. What view should the modern reader adopt in order to resolve the problem
of how to characterize the Agricola? Paramount to this type of inquiry is the question of genre.
What does the blend of these generic traditions mean to our interpretation of the Agricola?

The approaches that genre theory provides for looking at what genre might mean to an
ancient Greek or Roman can prove particularly helpful, for then we can consider what was the
appropriate style or convention of a work like the Agricola. According to genre theory, there is
no rigid or exact methodology for the classification and taxonomy of texts into genres. In lieu of
a standard approach, many scholars look to purpose in order to infer whether or not a particular
work is considered biography; however, modern theorists suggest that not only purpose but form
and content should be studied to place such works in their literary context.7 Form and content
are important because subject matter alone fails to take into account how the subject is treated
and treatment is often a primary difference between certain genres.8

Francis Cairns, however, in his work on generic composition explains that content is the
most reliable method of defining genre. He identifies two sets of elements, primary ones such as
persons, situation, or functions, which are necessary for the genre, and secondary elements or
topoi, which are the “smallest divisions of the material which may appear in several different

7 Cf. Cox 1983; Burridge 1992; this debate is mainly centered around the New Testament studies and the
classification of the gospels as ‘biography.’
genres." These two elements together constitute a “common background” that the author and the reader share and the author exploits. This “generic expectation,” he explains, was something all learned men of the time shared through their education and was a part of their cultural and social heritage. It is only through studying these elements that the modern reader is assisted in understanding a work which he or she is far removed from because of the lack of the assumed shared background necessary for the correct interpretation of texts. Also, as Burridge points out in his work on the nature of biography within the Gospels, this generic expectation helps readers appreciate the skill of the artist since they can observe how he chooses to operate within his chosen genre. 

Interpreting a genre correctly is important for the proper understanding of a text; however adding different generic elements to a work does not, as Goodyear puts it, “unbalance the whole.” On the contrary, the interactions between the two complement each other in a relationship that can serve to bring out more meaning from the text. If we follow Burridge’s approach, one should conceive of literature not as a static entity but as a network of relationships with flexible boundaries. Such is the case in genres of poetry where the line between such works like elegy and epigram are often blurred. The confluence of more than one genre occurred regularly throughout works in classical antiquity and does not hinder the reader’s ability to grasp their meaning. As Conte asserts using the example of the tenth eclogue of Vergil, “bucolic does not renounce its own literary individuality by becoming contaminated in some way with elegy” but rather “upon the limited terrain of a shared space, elegy and bucolic take on life

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10 Burridge 1992: 60.
and confront each other.”¹³ Marincola in his study of Greco-Roman historiography uses this example and compares it to different generic elements interacting within the *Agricola*. He states that the eclogue is thus “the exploration of the limits of one poetic genre (the bucolic) at the moment in which its specific and distinctive features are defined, by a dialectical comparison, as bordering upon those of another genre.”¹⁴ However, both Marincola and Conte speak in terms of these elements ‘competing’ within a shared space. It is my contention that the different generic elements within the *Agricola* are not in conflict but rather complement each other in a dynamic relationship that aids Tacitus’ laudatory portrayal of Agricola.

In this thesis, I explore two generic elements in the *Agricola*, biography and ethnography, their relationship to each other, and how they contribute to the characterization of Agricola. In chapter 2, I begin with the tradition of biographic writing in the Greco-Roman world, its close relationship to historiography, and its flexibility as a genre. Since biography constitutes the major literary focus of this work, I deal with the specific details of biography in the *Agricola* in chapter 3, discuss how he uses its literary conventions, and how these conventions function to characterize his father-in-law. In chapter 4, I explore the genre of ancient ethnography and how its formulaic nature fits into historical works of Greco-Roman authors. I then draw parallels to how Tacitus uses the ethnographic excursus on the Britons contained in c.10-12 of his work. In chapter 5, I discuss the interaction between these two genres within the *Agricola*. We shall see that the ethnographical descriptions of Britain serve as a mirror in which the character and deeds of Agricola are reflected and introduce themes that are important to his characterization. Thus, the ethnographic excursus contained in c. 10-12, instead of detracting from the purpose of the

¹³ Conte 1994a: 121.

work, aids in the characterization of Agricola and is an integral part of his biography. This interaction gives the reader a more thorough and unique portrayal of Agricola that biography alone could not provide, one which has kept his memory alive in the minds of the Western world for hundreds of years.
CHAPTER 2
GRECO-ROMAN BIOGRAPHY

The first lines of Tacitus’ *Agricola* seem programmatic for the rest of his monograph: 

*Clarorum virorum facta moresque posteris tradere*, 1.1.\(^1\) Here in the beginning of his work he purports to narrate for posterity the deeds and character of a distinguished man, his father-in-law Agricola. Yet unlike modern biography, the focus on the character of Agricola is not always readily apparent. Indeed, the actual mention of Agricola’s name does not appear until the third chapter of the work. In order to figure out how the *Agricola* functions as biography, it is necessary to explore the genre of ancient biography in its Greek and Roman contexts. As we shall see, the convention of ancient biography differed from that of modern biography in many aspects, most importantly in its style and content. In this chapter, I take a detailed look into the ancient genre of biography and how Tacitus’ *laudatio memoriae* fits into the context of this most flexible of ancient genres.

**Modern Biography**

The modern definition of biography states that this genre of literature encompasses a multivariate view of the individual by analyzing his personality which includes a detailed look at his life experiences.\(^2\) A biography is more than a list of impersonal facts about a famous or notable individual. Besides and beyond significant dates and achievements like birth, marriage, and death, it also gives the reader a qualitative look at a person beyond the quantitative, annalistic records. It favors describing personal experiences from early childhood into adulthood and their emotional impact—psychological details missing in most ancient biographies—to gain a more complete portrait of an individual. Modern biography also favors sociological

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\(^1\) My quotations from the Latin text of the *Agricola*, unless otherwise noted, are based on Ogilvie and Richmond 1967. All Latin translations are mine, unless otherwise noted.

\(^2\) Stone 1982.
explanations for the actions of the individual, showing how their upbringing and environment formed a large part of their character. ³

For example, one of the most famous biographies of our time has been Alex Haley’s *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. Written by Haley from collected interviews with Malcolm while he was still alive, the work details the life story of a man who became one of the greatest African-American civil-rights activists. Haley recounts a significant event that foreshadowed Malcolm’s eventual murder by the hands of assassins:

> When my mother was pregnant with me, she told me later, a party of hooded Ku Klux Klan riders galloped up to our home in Omaha, Nebraska, one night. Surrounding the house, brandishing their shotguns and rifles, they shouted for my father to come out.

> He believed … that freedom, independence and self-respect could never be achieved by the Negro in America, and that therefore the Negro should leave America to the white man and return to his African land of origin. Among the reasons my father had decided to risk and dedicate his life to help disseminate this philosophy among his people was that he had seen four of his six brothers die by violence….my father was finally himself to die by the white man’s hands.

> It has always been my belief that I, too, will die by violence. I have done all that I can to be prepared.⁴

Though the story focuses Malcolm’s personal history, it would be hard to divorce his story from the political and socio-economic realities of his day, which define a man together with his personal experiences. It also delves into the emotions of experiencing such events. Haley stresses the socio-historical realities of Malcolm’s day as the most important factor contributing to the man he became. Malcolm’s recollection of events of his troubled childhood illustrates to the reader his choice to become an activist for African-American rights and the path that he chose to accomplish his goals. Just as modern biography often puts its subjects into a social and historical context, Tacitus’ characterization of Agricola as a governor says much not only about


his character but it also is a reflection on the politics of the time and, by extension, a reflection on the conditions of Domitian’s reign.\(^5\) We cannot understand Malcolm the man without understanding where he came from, the environment he grew up in, and the trials he had to endure. This was mostly likely the same motivation for Tacitus’ inclusion of the many details of the most important political role in Agricola’s life, the governorship of Britain. This major constituent of his biography is important as we take a look at the role Britain plays in the description of Agricola. As we shall see, however, these apparent digressions have led some to question the categorization of this work as biography

**Ancient Biography: Its Origins and Conception**

If we are to believe Fowler’s assertion that every work of literature belongs to at least one genre and contains a significant generic element, how did the ancients view the writing of biography and did they classify it into a genre at all?\(^6\) Ancient biography grew out of a desire to preserve the accomplishments of famous and notable men after their death for posterity. From this desire grew the compulsion of men to celebrate heroic deeds in such media as epic, dirges and funeral eulogies. The main impetus for development of the biographical genre originated with the Greeks.\(^7\) The works of authors such as Stesimbrotus of Thasos (fl. late 5\(^{\text{th}}\) cent. BCE), who wrote biographies of Themistocles, Pericles, and others, represent one of the earliest forms of the genre. These works took on various forms and styles such as the encomium (ἐγκώμιον), an exposition praising a person for their virtue. Isocrates’ *Evagoras* and Xenophon’s *Agesilaus* are exemplary models of this type of ‘biography.’ The *Agesilaus* was especially important since it foreshadowed the structure of subsequent biography in its bipartite division into *praxeis*, or

\(^5\) See Haynes 2006 for a discussion on the *Agricola* and the memory of Domitian’s reign.


\(^7\) Momigliano 1993.
chronological account of a person’s life, and *ethos*, the systematic treatment of character.\(^8\) Though *bioi* were written in one form or another since the 5\(^{\text{th}}\) century BCE, the genre only received its appellation, *bios*, during the Hellenistic period.\(^9\) Some were character sketches, minor parts of larger historical works. For example, in the *Histories*, Herodotus includes several biographical narratives such as the one of Croesus and his son Atys (1.28-36).

We know from Quintilian’s remarks in the *Institutio Oratoria* that the ancients differentiated among genres based on subject matter: *Id quoque vitandum, in quo magna pars errat, ne in oratione poetas nobis et historicos, in illis operibus oratores aut declamatores imitandos putemus*. *Sua cuique proposito lex, suus decor est*, Inst.10.2.21. Before him, Plato described in the *Republic* Socrates’ classification of poetry into three groups, divided by the style of narration (*Resp*. 392d). The genre of ancient biography, however, presents the reader with a particular problem. Though the Greeks defined the writing of lives as *bioi*, the conventions of the genre were not strictly defined. Therefore we find a myriad of texts which could be placed in the biographical tradition, such as encomia, the works of early logographers, and panegyric. This poses a problem for those trying to classify the *Agricola* as biography, since the work as a whole displays a variety of literary genres, including ethnography and history.

**Historiography and Biography**

Since its inception, biography has been closely associated with the writing of history. Both seek to record events of the past for posterity. Histories, of course, must contain some element of the biographical since it necessary to include some details concerning the character of a person whose actions are important in relation to the historical event described. Likewise,

\[^{8}\text{Cox 1983: 8.}\]

\[^{9}\text{Momigliano 1993: 29-31.}\]
biography must contain some element of history since it is through events of the past that many biographers seek to describe their character. As Deline states: “All history must contain,…some element of biography. When studying the affairs of men, the men themselves inevitably become the subject of scrutiny.”

Though similar, biography is distinguished from history by its systematic written account of a man’s life from birth to death.

Many ancient authors have pointed to the difference between writing histories and writing biographies. Polybius in his *Histories* makes note of this difference. Take for example his account of the life and character of Philopoemen, the general and brilliant military tactician of the Achaean league who helped destroy Sparta and regain control of most of the Peloponnesus in the early 2nd century BCE. Polybius states that his separate account of Philopoemen’s deeds, apparently a previously written *encomium*, was more suited to panegyric since he recounted his deeds summarily and with exaggeration (*Hist*. 10.21.8):

> ὃσπερ γὰρ ἐκεῖνος ὁ τόπος ὑπάρχων ἐγκωμιαστικός, ἀπήτευ τὸν κεφαλαίωδη καὶ μετὰ αὐξήσεως τῶν πράξεων ἀπολογισμὸν οὕτως ὁ τῆς ἱστορίας κοινὸς ὁν ἐπαίνοι καὶ ψόγοι, ἦπτε τὸν ἀλήθη καὶ τὸν μετὰ ἀποδείξεως καὶ τῶν ἐκάστοις παρεπομένων συλλογισμῶν.

For just as the former work, being in the form of an encomium, demanded a summary and somewhat exaggerated account of his achievements, so the present history, which distributes praise and blame impartially, demands a strictly true account and one which states the ground on which either praise or blame is based.

History requires the setting forth of the truth without praise or blame (ἐπαίνου καὶ ψόγου).

Plutarch also gives his opinion on the difference between writing history and writing biography (*Alex.* 1):

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11 Momigliano 1993: 11.

12 Translation from Paton 1968: 155.
For it is not Histories that I am writing, but Lives; and in the most illustrious deeds there is not always a manifestation of virtue or vice, nay, a slight thing like a phrase or a jest often makes a greater revelation of character than battles where thousands fall, or the greatest armaments, or sieges of cities. Accordingly, just as painters get the likenesses in their portraits from the face and the expression of the eyes, wherein the character shows itself, but make very little account of the other parts of the body, so I must be permitted to devote myself rather to the signs of the soul in men, and by means of these to portray the life of each, leaving to others the description of their great contests.13

Polybius is more concerned with the form and style with which an author treats the details of a man’s life as the delineating factor between the genres. Plutarch, on the other hand, reasons that content distinguishes biography from history, since some small details, such as expressions or gestures, can give the reader a better understanding of the character of man than famous battles and military exploits. Similarly, Cox explains, as early as the 5th century BCE, Greek writers distinguished history as focusing on political and military events, excluding systematic treatments of religious and social phenomena.14 Momigliano likened work of Greek biographers as akin to antiquarians who “took individual achievement into account, whereas historians concentrated on the activities of the collective body of the state.”15

Biography and historiography were intimately related mainly because biography was and remains today such a flexible literary genre. The two are not mutually exclusive. For example, Sallust’s monographs Bellum Catilinae and Bellum Jurgurthinum, though centered on the

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14 Cox 1983: 5.
exploits of a single character, are considered history because the primary concern was the political context. Though Sallust gives us character sketches of both men (Cat. 5; Iug. 6-7), the narrative is about the conspiracy itself and Jurgurtha’s war with Rome. As biography’s literary cousin, history played a strong role in ancient biography and continues to do so today. To no less an extent, the Agricola contains many influences from works such as Sallust and Livy, particularly in the more historical sections of the narrative pertaining to Agricola’s governorship of Britain and his military exploits. Scholars have pointed out the striking similarity of the speeches of Calgacus and Agricola before the battle of Mons Graupius to those of Hannibal and Scipio before the battle at Ticinus (Livy 21.41-44). Tacitus also employs Livy’s vocabulary when describing military tactics, and from Sallust, we see the use of historic infinitive, just one among many stylistic features he borrowed from this predecessor. Historiography plays an important role in the Agricola because of its close relationship to biography.

**Characteristics of Ancient Biography**

Biography is such a flexible genre because it encompasses many overlapping traditions and includes works of varying form, style, length, and truthfulness. There are numerous approaches to the form and content of ancient biography. For example, Suetonius (ca. 120 CE) and Plutarch (ca. 100 CE) wrote their bioi in their own particular form and fashion, the former favoring ‘gossipy’ details about his characters’ lives and the latter favoring a more historical approach to his subjects. Indeed as Pelling states, “This biographical genre is an extremely

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16 Cf. Leo 1901: 232 “Sallust hat biographische Elemente in die Historie, Tacitus historische Elemente in die Biographie hineingerbeitet.”


18 Cf. Ogilvie and Richmond 1967: 241 n. 25.3.
flexible one, and admits works of very different patterns.”\textsuperscript{19} This flexibility prevented Momigliano from a more comprehensive definition of the biographical genre, since there is no established precept of how exactly biography is to be written.\textsuperscript{20} It is important to note the different approaches the ancients had to writing \textit{bioi} influenced Tacitus’ blending of styles and form to narrate the life history of Agricola. Biography did, however, develop some conventions of its own.

Modern scholars have noted three distinct styles of biographical works that were practiced by Tacitus’ time. The first style, favored by Nepos and Plutarch, stems from Aristotle’s successors in the Peripatetic school who were interested in ethics which they thought would lead to a deeper exploration of human personality. The so-called Peripatetic type of biography favored revealing a man’s character through his actions and was more prone to embellish the truth behind the details of the character’s life. The second type of biography was developed in Alexandria by grammarians interested in the writing of \textit{bioi} of literary men, where more attention was paid to chronology than character. The author tried to ascertain the truth about the character of the man by judicious weighing of available evidence. A third type was based on the encomium; it could stand on its own as a separate work or could be incorporated into a larger work such as a history in the form of a character sketch, much like the account Polybius gave about Philopoemen.

Leo’s definitive work on ancient biography describes the two most important styles of the three traditions, one represented by Plutarch and the other by Suetonius.\textsuperscript{21} Plutarch’s

\textsuperscript{19} Pelling 1980: 139.

\textsuperscript{20} Momigliano 1993: 11.

\textsuperscript{21} Cf. Leo 1901: 91 “Diese Doppeltheilung (προάξις chronologisch, ἀρετή nach Kategorien) mit der ἀνακεφαλαίωσις ist das eigne Merkmal des xenophontischen ἐγκώμιον.”
arrangement of his *bioi* gives a straightforward chronological account of events and was suited to recounting the lives of military and political figures. The Suetonian style gives a systematically ordered characterization of the individual and his achievements not strictly bound by chronology. These are better suited to the lives of writers.\(^{22}\) These two traditions influence the writing of biography into later antiquity and Christian hagiography.

Ancient biography is marked by the division of the subject matter into *πραξεις* and *νομος*. As previously mentioned, this was an influence from the encomium of Xenophon. The ancient biographers preserved this division, and the interaction between the chronological account of the life and the treatment of the character continued to become the major focus of their work.\(^{23}\) The two-part format was not always strictly observed. As we have already seen, the Plutarchian and Suetonian styles of biographical writing treated this division in their own fashion according to what they deemed appropriate for the subject matter.

Biography was also not bound by many of the conventions of historiography and therefore included information deemed ‘inappropriate’ for histories. Chief among them was the use of anecdote to portray character. Plutarch’s oft-quoted introduction to his life of Alexander illustrates the difference between writing history and biography and how these ‘lesser moments’ (*πραγματα* θραχυ) were not particularly suitable for history but are an integral part of biography. Moreover, compared to historiography, biography was not strictly confined by chronology.\(^{24}\) The biographer could group events of a man’s life in a manner he thought best to describe his character, as again his guiding principal was not historical accuracy but character portrait. For example, Suetonius states in his life of Augustus that he would rather use subject headings

\(^{22}\) Momigliano 1993: 18.

\(^{23}\) Cox 1983: 13.

\(^{24}\) Deline 2001: ¶4.
instead of chronological order to make the narrative more understandable: *Proposita vitae eius velut summa, partes singillatim neque per tempora sed per species exsequar, quo distinctius demonstrari cognoscique possint*, Aug. 9.

In addition, ancient biography differs from modern biography in two significant ways. First, ancient biography does not lean towards the inner workings of an individual to relate his accomplishments and deeds. Haley’s candor and emotional content would not occur in ancient Greek or Roman biography. One scholar of modern biography noted that the “constant direction in the evolution of biography has been from the outward to the inward.”  

Pelling notes the lack of intimacy in Roman biography, saying that the exploration of spiritual life is deemed inappropriate for the genre. 

Second, ancient biographers did not provide a description of a man in order to emphasize the individual himself or to describe how he was different, but rather to show how that individual fit into a type and a characteristic of a group. Ancient biography did not emphasize personality but qualities of an individual such as his virtue or *mores*. We see this emphasis manifested in the arrangement of many ancient biographies in series comparing and contrasting famous figures in groups, such as politicians, generals, philosophers, and writers (e.g. Plutarch’s *vitae* of Alexander and Caesar).

Though these serve as guiding principles, the biographical genre as a whole tended to display these characteristics in differing fashions, if at all. We shall see in the *Agricola* that the favored division of biography into *praxeis* and *ethos* was not firmly followed and that Tacitus

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25 Thayer 1920: 34.

26 Pelling 1980: 130.


portrays Agricola as a sum of his virtue and deeds, as was the tradition in Roman biography, rather than expanding on details of his individual personality.

**Biography at Rome**

The *Agricola* was one of Tacitus’ earliest works, published in 98 CE. Written near the time he delivered his famous funeral oration for the ex-consul Verginius Rufus, the foray into this genre seems particularly apt. The genre seemed to enjoy much popularity in Rome. Biography was especially suited to Roman taste since they already had a tradition of displaying their ancestors funeral masks (*imagines maiorum*) and of funeral orations (*laudatio funebris*), which were sometimes written down after delivery and kept in the family archives. Tacitus relates to us in the beginning of the *Agricola* that the recording of worthy deeds of great men was already an old tradition (*antiquitus usitatum*, 1.1). And indeed in the words of Syme, the Romans were ‘addicted to tradition.’ Worthy men were induced to publish their records of virtue not for self-serving purposes but for the consciousness of well-doing: *ita celeberrimus quisque ingenio ad prodendam virtutis memoriam sine gratia aut ambitione bonae tantum conscientiae pretio ducebatur*, 1.2. These accounts serve a didactic purpose so Roman citizens may try to model their lives on these figures by emulating their outstanding *virtus* and *mores*.

Who were Tacitus’ biographic predecessors at Rome who might have influenced him? Marcus Terentius Varro and Cornelius Nepos are the two most well known names in Roman biography before Tacitus’ time, although there are some allusions to minor authors whose works we unfortunately know nothing about. Though not extant, one of the earliest known examples of Latin biography was Varro’s *Imagines* written in 44 BCE. This work included 700 portraits of

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29 See Ogilvie and Richmond 1967: 10-11 on the dating of Tacitus’ minor works.

30 Syme 1958: 27.

31 See Ogilvie and Richmond 1967: 128 n.1.2 on the phrase ‘*bonae...conscientiae*.’
illustrious men such as kings, poets, philosophers and writers, all of which were accompanied by an epigram which characterized the subject of the work. Though rooted in the tradition of Roman aristocratic *imagines* and *tituli*, Varro included in his work a side by side comparison of not only Roman but Greek figures in history. The *Imagines* is reminiscent of Greek encomium; Varro is thought to have imported this genre into Roman literature.³² Cornelius Nepos of Catullan fame is next in the tradition of Roman biography. His *De viris illustribus* written ca. 35 BCE also favors pairing lives of eminent men such as foreign and Roman kings, or Greek politicians and their Roman counterparts. The only section of that work that survives today is that on foreign generals. His style follows the Peripatetic school, or Plutarchian style, of biography, with a chronology of life events followed by ethical reflection diversified with anecdotes for entertainment.³³ These authors influenced Suetonius, Plutarch, and the tradition of Christian hagiography in late antiquity; however, Tacitus’ *Agricola*, in the Roman biographical tradition, is a unique work which broke with the trends established by his predecessors. In the next chapter, I explore exactly how Tacitus’ work fits into the Graeco-Roman biographical tradition.

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³² Stuart 1928: 186.
Tacitus’ style of biographical writing is unique in many ways. He takes the genre and molds it into his own creation with a mixture of different literary traditions. Chief among these traditions is that of historiography, rhetoric, and the Roman *laudatio funebris*. This combination distinguishes Tacitus’ work among extant Roman biographies and it gives us a multifaceted view of Agricola by invoking these different literary genres. The distinct character of biography with its flexible nature allows Tacitus to achieve this feat.

Specific biographical details of Agricola’s life are concentrated in the beginning and end of the narrative with the ethnographic and historiographic material occupying over half the work (c. 10-38). But from the outset, the *Agricola* shows a historiographical influence. The beginning reads like a *proemium* of a historical work. No other Roman biographer starts the narrative for a single character in this manner. Nepos gives a preface to his series on eminent generals but each life begins by describing the subject’s claim to fame or origin. Any other intrusion by the author usually occurs in the middle of the work.¹ Tacitus describes his purpose (*at nunc narraturo mihi vitam defuncti hominis*, 1.4) and also states that he will not regret the task of writing down these events (*non tamen pigebit...composuisse*, 3.3). This is similar to the prefaces of history which introduce the theme and scope of the work. Tacitus’ sentiments are akin to Livy’s in the beginning of the *Ab Urbe Condita*: *utcumque erit, iuuet tamen rerum gestarum memoriae principis terrarum populi pro uirili parte et ipsum consuluisse*, 1.1. Also the opening phrase “*Clarorum virorum*” echoes the beginning of Cato the Elder’s *Origines*, the fragment of which is found in Cicero: *clarorum virorum atque magorum non minus otii quam negotii rationem*

Ogilvie and Richmond make the astute observation that the allusion to the work is fitting since the theme of the *Origines* was that success in life should be won by personal achievement (*virtus*) rather than by circumstances, birth, or position. This theme is reflected in the story of Agricola, a man whom Tacitus describes as having earned his exalted position through singular distinction in his achievements: *quippe et vera bona, quae in virtutibus sita sunt, impleverat, et consulari ac triumphalibus ornamentis praedito quid aliud adstruere fortuna poterat?* 44.3. It is clear that Tacitus shows his debt to previous Latin literature in the beginning of the *Agricola* in a similar manner as the *Annales* and *Germania* show marked resemblance to previous authors.

The *Agricola* not only reflects the tradition of historiography, it also displays an ornate oratorical style. Although Tacitus pleads with the reader to excuse his inexperience (*incondita ac rudi voce*, 3.3), careful inspection of his style shows otherwise. Ogilvie and Richmond note that similarities of the opening and closing sections of the *Agricola* display affinities with the periods and diction of Cicero which display richness of expression and a fondness for the accumulation of virtual synonyms. Such phrases as *vicit ac supergressa est* (1.1), *tam saeva et infesta virtutibus tempora* (1.4), *fiduciam ac robur* (3.1), *formam ac figuram* (46.3), and *celebritate et frequentia* (40.3) reveal Tacitus’ adherence to rhetorical form of composition, an ornate style which lends gravity to the undertaking. Since this is one of Tacitus’ earliest works,

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2 Cic. Planc. 66: “etenum M. Catonis illud quod in principio scripsit originum suarum semper magnificentum et praeclarum putavi...”

3 Ogilvie and Richmond 1967: 126, n. 1.1.

4 Cf. Ann.1.1: *urber Romam a principio reges habuere* and Cat. 2.1: *Igitur initio reges*; Germ. 1.1: *Germania omnis....separatur* and B Gall. 1.1: *Gallia est omnis divisa...*

5 Ogilvie and Richmond 1967: 22.

he may have felt the need to express his reasons for writing and to impress his audience with his literary skills.

The rhetorical influence in this work also extends to the genre of the *laudatio funebris*. A Roman custom whose purpose was akin to an encomium, the *laudatio* was a funeral oration praising the deceased’s accomplishments and virtues. The principal difference between Tacitus’ biographical work and those of his Roman predecessors is that the subject is a family member, his father-in-law, which links the work to the conventions of a *laudatio funebris*. In his introduction he writes that he wishes to dedicate this work to the glory of his father-in-law and states that a profession of *pietas* is the motivation of writing it: *hic interim liber honori Agricolae socii mei destinatus, professione pietas aut laudatus erit aut excusatus*, 3.3. Towards the end of the *Agricola*, Tacitus again picks up the theme of familial duty to the memory of Agricola: *admiratione te potius et laudibus et, si natura suppeditet, similitudine colamus: is verus honos, ea coniunctissimi cuiusque pietas*, 46.2. Moreover, he addresses the spirit of his father-in-law to rest in peace and asks that he help his family recover from their mourning so that they remember his virtue instead (46.1):

> Si quis piorum manibus locus, si, ut sapientibus placet, non cum corpore extinguuntur magnae animae, placide quiescas, nosque domum tuam ab infirmo desiderio et muliebris lamentis ad contemplationem virtutum tuarum voces, quas neque lugeri neque plangi fas est.

If there is some place for the ghostly shades of the blessed dead, if, as it is agreeable to wise men, great minds do not perish with the body, may you rest peacefully, and may you call us, your household, from debilitating grief and womanish lamentations towards the contemplation of your virtues, over which it is not lawful either to grieve or lament.
Such colorful language is reminiscent of the rhetoric of the *laudatio*.\(^7\) Tacitus’ words regarding the purpose is similar to Polybius’ account of the Roman funerary rites and the *laudatio* itself *(Hist. 6.54.2)*:

ēξ ὁν καίνοποιομένης ἀεὶ τῶν ἄγαθῶν ἄνδρῶν τῆς ἐπ’ ἀρετῆ φήμης ἀθανατίζεται μὲν ἢ τῶν καλῶν τι διαπρεξιμένων εὐκλεία γνώριμος δὲ τοῖς πολλοῖς καὶ παραδόσιμος τοῖς ἐπιγινομένοις ἢ τῶν εὐργητησάντων τὴν πατρίδα γίνεται δόξα.

By this means, by this constant renewal of the good report of brave men, the celebrity of those who performed noble deeds is rendered immortal, while at the same time the fame of those who did good service to their country becomes known to the people and a heritage for future generations.\(^8\)

This sentiment is echoed in the close of the work: *Agricola posteritati narratus et traditus superstes erit*, 46.4. Moreover, the closing chapter is also reminiscent of the *consolatio* described by Cicero in his *De Oratore* again invoking the *Agricola’s* rhetorical influence *(De or. 3.118)*:\(^9\)

Quae vero referuntur ad agendum, aut in offici disceptatione versantur, quo in genere quid rectum faciendumque sit quaeritur, cui loco omnis virtutum et vitiorum est silva subjecta, aut in animorum aliqua permotione aut gignenda aut sedanda tollendave tractantur. Huic generi subjectae sunt cohortationes, obiurgationes, consolationes, miserationes omnisque ad omnem animi motum et impulsio et, si ita res feret, mitigatio.

Those referring to conduct either deal with the discussion of duty – the department that asks what action is right and proper, a topic comprising the whole subject of the virtues and vices – or are employed either in producing or in allaying or removing some emotion. This class comprises modes of exhortation, reproach, consolation, compassion and every method of exciting, and also, if so indicated by the situation, of allaying all the emotions.\(^10\)

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\(^7\) Cf. *laudatio Turiae*, the most substantial example of a *laudatio funebris* which survives. See Wistrand 1976 for text and discussion.

\(^8\) Translation from Paton 1979: 391.

\(^9\) Ogilvie and Richmond 1967: 22.

\(^10\) Translation from Rackham 1968: 93.
Some scholars believe that the *Agricola* represents the tradition of Greek encomium rather than biography because of the similarities to the *laudatio funebris*.\(^{11}\) Although this notion is disputed, the invocation of the genre raises the achievements of Agricola to the lofty level of that tradition.\(^{12}\) Tacitus portrays his father-in-law’s *virtus* as a model for emulation.

The character portrait provided by Tacitus is in keeping with the characteristic of ancient biography of the Plutarchian or Peripatetic style, which is more concerned with description of virtue and ideal traits than the individual itself. In his description of Agricola, Tacitus attributes to him the highest conventional Roman virtues—military skill, modesty, temperance, and statesmanship. These are emphasized to such an extent that Agricola the ‘individual’ is obscured by the categorization into these virtues. For example, Agricola is temperate: *retinuitque, quod est difficillimum, ex sapientia modum*, 4.3; *Agricola, naturali prudentia, quamvis inter togatus, facile iusteque agebat*, 9.2-3. He is also brave as in the case when he stood alongside his troops in the Battle of Mons Graupius after his rousing speech (35.4), modest about his many achievements (8.3; 42.3), hardworking (5.1; 9.4) and an able and just governor of Britain (18.5; 19.1).

We do not hear specific details about his personality, such as his likes or dislikes, nor do we even get a full physical description of the man. At *Agr.* 44, Tacitus gives us only a hint of the latter where he chooses to emphasize general quality and character rather than specifics: *quod si habitum quoque eius posteri noscere velint, decentior quam sublimior fuit: nihil impetus in vultu: gratia oris supererat. bonum virum facile crederes, magnum libenter*, 44.2-3. The adjectives *bonum* and *magnum* are used in the abstract sense and do not give much of a description of his

\(^{11}\) Cf. Leo 1920: 224; Stuart 1928: 253; Crawford 1941.

\(^{12}\) Cf. Leo 1920: 224-33 and Furneaux and Anderson 1922: xxii for a discussion of the similarities between the genre of encomium and the *Agricola*. 

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physical appearance. This is much more in keeping with the style of Nepos than of Suetonius who prefers to give us an intimate and gossipy view of his subjects. For example, Suetonius has no qualms about telling us that Augustus is afraid of lightening and thunder (Aug. 90) and that he had a propensity for silly sayings such as “quicker than boiled asparagus” (Aug. 87). Suetonius also gives full physical descriptions of his subjects, including the good and the bad. For example, although he describes Augustus as exceedingly handsome (forma fuit eximia, Aug. 79), he also states his teeth were wide apart and worn down (dentes raros et exiguos et scabros, Aug. 79) and that his eyebrows were joined together (supercilia coniuncta, Aug. 79). The fact that he writes such unflattering, trifle tidbits about the emperors of Rome shows the different purpose he has in writing his biographies.

Unlike Suetonius, Tacitus is writing this biography for laudatory purposes. The closest that the work comes to describing a character fault occurs in c.22: apud quosdam acerbior in conviciis narrabatur; ut erat comis bonis, ita adversus malos iniucundus, 22.4. The event is reported in the passive and with the indefinite particle quosdam to emphasize the speculative nature of the remarks. It is, however, met with immediate qualification: ceterum ex iracundia nihil supererat secretum, ut silentium eius non timeres: honestius putabat offendere quam odisse, 22.4. Woodhead observes that although Tacitus is not prone to exaggeration of virtues, we should not expect to find any mention of bad traits in his portrayal of Agricola understandably because his main purpose was tribute to his father-in-law.13 Tacitus characterizes Agricola in a stylized manner fitting the tradition of a laudatio and a subject worthy of emulation because of his virtus.

Tacitus’ salient criticism of the injustices of Domitian and his reign provide a stark contrast to the virtuous and benevolent Agricola. This has led some scholars believe that the work can also be viewed as a political statement against Domitian’s reign. Tacitus is not silent about his disdain for Domitian. He openly criticized the fact that he had to ask permission to write his biography since the age seemed hostile to writing about great virtue: …venia opus fuit, quam non petissem incusaturus: tam saeva et infesta virtutibus tempora, 1.4. Also he alludes to the cases of Q. Arulenus Iunius Rusticus and Herennius Senecio (2.1). Rusticus wrote a biography of P. Clodius Paetus, a Stoic who took his own life after being accused of maiestas. Rusticus was subsequently put to death by Domitian’s orders in 93 CE. Herennius Senecio similarly wrote an account of C. Helvidius Priscus’ life, who openly criticized the emperor Vespasian. He also met the same fate as Rusticus for his biographical work. Hutton writes that all four men were related by their adherence to a “Stoic opposition”—not of the principate but of the servile position of the Senate. Tacitus also states that praise of these men became a capital offense (capitale fuisse, 2.1) and that their books were ordered to be burned and with it, the liberty of the Senate and the monuments of the deeds of “clarissimorum ingeniorum” perished.

Throughout the Agricola, Tacitus describes Domitian in disparaging terms. Domitian poured forth the life-blood of the state: Domitianus non iam per intervalla ac spiramenta temporum sed continuo et velut uno ictu rem publicam exhaust, 44.5. Tacitus’ characterizes him as a violent and envious person towards Agricola because of his victories in Britain. Agricola only escaped his wrath because he was pacified by his moderation and discretion (42.3). Domitian was also a man hostile to good qualities (infensus virtutibus princeps, 41.1). Tacitus

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14 Conte 1994: 533; Ogilvie and Richmond 1967: 13; for details regarding Roman political biography, see Geiger 1985.

15 Hutton 1914: 29.
even implicates Domitian in the sudden death of Agricola (43.2). The characterization of
Domitian and his principate stands in stark contrast to Agricola, who brought peace and
civilization to Britain, ruled with equity and temperance, and displayed irreproachable mores.
Tacitus exhorts his readers to learn by Agricola’s example that even good men can live under
bad rulers: posse etiam sub malis principibus magnos viros esse, 42.4.

Tacitus’ criticism of Domitian and his principate may well represent political propaganda
in the form of biography. This tradition stretches back to the Peripatetic school of biography,
where the members of this group wrote bioi of philosophers mainly to evaluate and criticize the
various philosophic schools. Momigliano states that attacks on doctrine must have been freely
mixed with personal attacks on the individual.\textsuperscript{16} Whatever the case, the political message
brought forth by Tacitus through the example of Agricola illustrates another component of this
biography and how the excesses of Domitian serve as a stark contrast to his virtues.

To challenge the Agricola’s place as a representative of ancient biography is to invite
criticism. Since Tacitus has made a clear statement of purpose in the first lines, most modern
editors do not challenge Tacitus’ own view of his work, although they seek to qualify it by
careful analysis of its structure and style.\textsuperscript{17} The fact that roughly half of the work deals with
subject matter other than the biographical details of Agricola’s life continues to hamper
categorization of this work in simple terms. We have seen how Tacitus has mixed the traditions
of encomium, the Roman laudatio funebris, historiography, rhetoric, and political biography.
But as we have seen in this chapter, the genre of ancient biography was an especially flexible one
and could readily admit these other traditions into its pages. Though history, its closest literary

\textsuperscript{16} Momigliano 1993: 71.

\textsuperscript{17} Cf. Furneaux and Anderson 1922: xxi-xxxii; Leo 1920: 224-33; Ogilvie and Richmond 1967: 11-31; Goodyear
cousin, encroached upon its narrative more often than any other genre, the inclusion of ethnography is an admixture that had never been seen before in ancient biography. It is to the discussion of the literary conventions of this genre we will now turn before discussing the special relationship between biography and ethnography that makes the *Agricola* so unique among ancient biographies.
CHAPTER 4
ANCIENT ETHNOGRAPHY

Chapters 10-12 of the *Agricola* mark a significant departure from Tacitus’ account of the achievements and character of his father-in-law. The description of the geography and inhabitants of the island of Britain follows Tacitus’ recounting of Agricola’s career up to the time he was made governor of Britain. These three chapters, one of the most famous descriptions of Britain in ancient times, are notable for two reasons: (1) Tacitus relates new information about the country because of the reconnaissance of Agricola’s administration and (2) the ethnographic descriptions help characterize Agricola by introducing themes that compare his character to the landscape and people around him and through intertextual allusions. The description that Tacitus gives us is not just a literary landscape, but has great bearing on the interpretation of Agricola’s character. The genre of ancient ethnography brings certain conventions that Tacitus weaves into his account with compelling results. In this chapter, I will explore the genre of ethnography in the ancient world, its components, and how Tacitus uses them in the *Agricola*.

According to Richard Thomas, whose book *Lands and Peoples in Roman Poetry* gives a brief description of the ethnographic tradition in the Greco-Roman world and how it relates to the tradition of Roman poetry, ethnographical writings had a long literary tradition in antiquity. He argues that poets such as Horace, Lucan, and Vergil used the formulaic elements of ethnography in a manner that recalls their literary tradition and invokes a new application of these elements. By studying how poets used the details demanded by the tradition one can evaluate the poet’s intentions. The application of this approach is also useful in prose. Though Horsfall and Evans note the importance of Thomas’ contribution to this area of study, the brevity
of his account leaves the reader wanting a more thorough treatment of specific characteristics of ethnography. Regrettably this is beyond the scope of his work.\textsuperscript{1}

Thomas observes the emergence of ethnographical writings in the 6\textsuperscript{th} century BCE with the advent of exploration and colonization of foreign locales by the Greeks. He states that with this, a desire to combine scientific methodology with descriptions of people and places emerged.\textsuperscript{2} One of the first ethnographical writers for whom we have evidence is Hecataeus of Miletus (\textit{fl}. 494 BCE), but it is difficult to ascertain how much of the genre had been formulated at the time because of the fragmentary nature of his work.\textsuperscript{3} During the fifth century, Greek writers became aware of the artistic potential of the genre. At this time, Herodotus wrote the \textit{Histories} with its memorable descriptions of the Scythians and Egyptians (2.2-182; 4.5-82). These accounts were not only made to be descriptive but also entertaining. Herodotus found an eager Greek audience who were fascinated at looking at the ‘other’ through his lens. Moreover, during this time, writers of ethnography were heavily influenced by the theories put forth in Hippocrates’ \textit{Περὶ ὄρων ὑδάτων τόπων} (Concerning Airs, Waters, and Places).\textsuperscript{4} In the Hippocratic treatise, variations in the physical appearance and customs of peoples of the earth are explained by their geographic location and climate, in what has been termed ‘anthropogeography.’\textsuperscript{5} For example, the treatise states that those peoples who inhabit places where they are exposed to winds “between the summer and the winter risings of the sun” and those opposite to them have a better disposition (\textit{Aer}. 5):

\textsuperscript{1} Cf. Horsfall 1984: 133; Evans 1985: 265.
\textsuperscript{2} Thomas 1982: 1.
\textsuperscript{3} Thomas 1982: 1.
\textsuperscript{4} The authorship of many writings attributed to Hippocrates has been disputed. See Lloyd 1975 for discussion.
\textsuperscript{5} Bloch 2000: 39.
The persons of the inhabitants are of better complexion and more blooming than elsewhere, unless some disease prevents this. They are clear-voiced and with better temper and intelligence than those who are exposed to the north, just as all things growing there are better.\(^6\)

Following such theories, writers such as Herodotus explained that, because of their particular climate, women in Egypt engaged in business and trade and men stayed at home to weave, contrary to what is customary among other cultures (Hdt. 2.35). Moreover, certain stereotypes such as Africans being better suited to endure heat and labor permeated Greek and Roman literature.\(^7\) We find evidence of this even in Livy’s assessment of Hannibal: *Nullo labore aut corpus fatigari aut animus uinci poterat. Caloris ac frigoris patientia par*, 21.4. Sallust mirrors this description of the Carthaginian Hannibal as hardy and capable of enduring labor in his description of Africans in the *Jugurtha*: *genus hominum salubri corpore, velox, patiens laborum*, 17.5. According to Thomas, as a result of Hippocrates’ treatise, description of geographical features became an important part of ethnography since the distinctions between people of different lands was seen as “an outgrowth of, and directly attributable to, differences in environment.”\(^8\)

The other great name in the development of ancient ethnography is Posidonius (135-51 BCE). This prolific ancient Greek writer composed hundred of works on different subjects including philosophy, mathematics, meteorology, and geography. His various works contained ethnographic accounts of the peoples he encountered during his travels. He tried to explain their

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\(^6\) Translation from Jones 1984: 81.

\(^7\) Cf. Tacitus’ *Germania* where Germans are not able to tolerate heat but can endure the cold: *minimeque sitim aestumque tolerare, frigora atque inediam caelo solove adsuerunt*, 4.3.

\(^8\) Thomas 1982: 2.
differences using his extensive geographic and meteorological knowledge. The influence of his work extended to numerous ancient authors who cite him, most notably Strabo, Diodorus, and Caesar. Their accounts of the Celts are influenced by his own earlier work.\(^9\) According to Thomas, he holds a central position as a geographer and ethnographer since he provides the main connection to Rome of the Greek ethnographical tradition.\(^10\)

In the Roman tradition, Caesar, Sallust, and Livy provide the main examples of ethnography before the time of Tacitus. Some poets such as Vergil, Horace, and Lucan show ethnographical content in their works as revealed by their diction and style in certain passages, but these are poetic contrivances specifically used to call to mind the ethnographic tradition.\(^11\) Thomas states that works of Caesar and Sallust plainly show the influence of the Greek ethnographical tradition which passed down into mainstream Roman literature.\(^12\) Many of its conventions were preserved in its Roman context. Caesar provides ethnographical descriptions of the Gauls and Britons in his \textit{Bellum Gallicum}.\(^13\) Sallust writes about North Africa and its inhabitants in the \textit{Jugurtha (Iug. 17-9)} and also has descriptions of Pontus, Sardinia and Corsica, and Crete in his fragmentary \textit{Histories}.\(^14\) Moreover, Livy contains some ethnographical discursions; for our purposes, the ethnographical description of Britain contained in book 105 and presented only in summary form is the most relevant. As we shall see, Tacitus shows great debt to these authors in both the \textit{Agricola} and \textit{Germania}.

\begin{footnotes}
\item[10] See Nash 1976.
\item[13] On Britain specifically, see \textit{B Gall}. 5.12-14.
\end{footnotes}
As with biography, ancient ethnographical writings differed greatly from modern ethnography. Modern ethnography systematically observes a culture through first hand observation. The modern ethnographer is supposed to be accurate, complete, and objective; he should not pass moral judgments on a people and is obliged to live for a certain time within the community which he is investigating.¹⁵ Many writers of ethnography in the ancient world did not observe their subject first hand but relied on the writings and testimony of others, as Tacitus did. Moreover, the ancients were not objective about their subjects but passed judgments on their character and behavior, often explaining them by means of anthropogeography and displaying their cultural biases.

The genre of ancient Greek and Roman ethnography, Thomas states, consists of both geographical and ethnological details and contains the following elements:

- Physical geography of the area (situs)
- Climate
- Agricultural produce, mineral resources, etc.
- Origins and features of the inhabitants (gentes)
- Political, social and military organization¹⁶

For each of these categories a distinct, fixed diction and form emerged which could be readily recognized and associated with the ethnographical genre. It is useful to turn to the seminal work of Norden, who found that by analyzing the proper title of the *Germania (de origine et situ Germanorum)*, the combination of the phrase *de situ* plus the genitive is the standard title for Latin ethnographical works, a phrase which Thomas calls an ethnographical *sphragis* (sign-post).¹⁷ Also there is stock vocabulary concerning the description of the inhabitants (e.g.

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origines, gens, populus, colo, teneo), disposition of their bodies (e.g. patientia, duritia) and meteorological concerns (e.g. caeli temperies). In addition, technical terms for foreign concepts and other specialized vocabulary not common in Latin prose are present (e.g. soldurii, essedum, uergobretus). In terms of form, Ogilvie and Richmond note that the order of the topics might vary, but situs usually precedes gentes and all categories are treated, even if superficially. Another interesting feature of the ethnographical genre is the description of thaumasia, or wonders. These serve as entertaining tidbits to readers that contrast exotic locales to their own familiar culture and environment. These marvels range from Herodotus’ description of Egyptian crocodiles (Hdt. 2.68) to Tacitus’ description of the drinking and gambling habits of the Germans (Germ. 22.2; 24.3).

The Genre Debate

Although ethnographical writings had a fixed form and particular diction, there is dissension among scholars whether to identify ethnography as its own separate genre or if it should be considered a sub-genre of historiography. From the inception of this form of writing, ethnographical descriptions have been included in works of history, geography, or commentaries and have only constituted a small part of such works. The first extant ethnographical monograph is Tacitus’ Germania, written in 98 CE. According to Bloch, while discussing the ethnographical discursions in Tacitus’ Historiae, ethnography cannot be construed as a specific genre but permeates all ancient literature. On the other hand, Thomas states that it

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18 Thomas 1982: 127 notes that the phrase caeli temperies is the exact phraseology that Hippocrates uses in his treatise to describe ideal climate (ἀέρος ἐύκρασια).
19 Ogilvie and Richmond 1967: 164 n.10.
20 See Marincola 1999 for a specific outline of the issues surrounding categorizing historical genres.
is a “formulaic literary genre.” By this means the ancient Greeks and Romans were “able to
depict the diversity of mankind, and thereby ... reach a fuller understanding of their own cultures
and of their place in the world.” Marincola in his article “Greco-Roman Historiography”
grapples with Jacoby’s (1909) assessment that ethnography constitutes an independent entity,
even though it is contained in works of other genres, since its elements were ‘fixed’ since the 5th
century BCE. Marincola states that there is no evidence that ethnography ever stood alone in its
own self-contained unit and that ethnographical writings within the ‘historical’ part of an
author’s work are not detachable but integral parts of it. Even though there is no evidence that
there were any self-contained ethnographical monographs existed before Tacitus’ Germania, it is
problematic to conceive of ethnographical writings as not part of a specific genre because of
their ‘secondary status’ in other literary works. Ethnography certainly had its own conventions
of diction, style and form.

From the modern view of genre theory, the form and content of ethnography is distinct
from that of historiography and therefore should constitute a separate, but closely related,
category. In addition, an important factor distinguishing ethnography from other works of
historiography is that the primary focalization, the point of view from which the history is told, is
on a locale foreign to a writer, whose specific aim was to describe certain key characteristics of
the people and geography. It is Jacoby’s assertion that the point of view of a work is extremely
important for understanding the nature of a particular history. Did this focalization determine a
consequent methodology and purpose? That is, did an author writing history approach his subject
matter at different angle than someone writing ethnography? It is my contention that

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23 Jacoby 1909 as summarized in Marincola 1999: 296.
ethnography does occupy a separate genre. Although it is impossible to prove that the ancients regarded it as a separate genre, the formulaic nature of ethnography gives the impression of being a distinct literary form. The relevance of treating ethnography as a genre in its own right or a sub-genre of historiography has a direct bearing on the description of ethnographical accounts in ancient writings by modern scholars as ‘digressions’ or excurses, which will be discussed in Chapter 5.

**Tacitus’ Sources**

By looking at Tacitus’ sources for his information on Britain, we can see how he closely follows the tradition of those who came before him in respect to Britain’s ethnographical description. Tacitus did not intend to provide systematic account of Britain. He states that this subject had already been well covered by his predecessors (10.1). He is most likely referring to Julius Caesar in his *Bellum Gallicum* (5.12-14), Strabo in his *Geographia* (2.5.8; 4.5) written probably during the reign of Tiberius, and Pomponius Mela (Pomon. 3.6) who wrote a geography (*De chorographia*) around the time of Claudius’ invasion of Britain (43-4 CE).\(^{24}\) These authors modeled their accounts on earlier Greek authors such as Pytheas (c. 325 BCE), Eratosthenes (276-194 BCE), and Posidonius who gave accounts of various lengths, mainly regarding the geography of the area.\(^{25}\) Knowledge of Britain, however, was significantly augmented with the increased Roman presence on the island starting with Caesar and then finally the invasion of Claudius in 43 CE. Tacitus also mentions the works of Livy and Fabius Rusticus as sources. Ogilvie and Richmond speculate that the reference to Livy must regard an account of Caesar’s expedition to Britain contained in his lost 105th book and that to Rusticus was a lost

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\(^{24}\) See Ogilvie and Richmond 1967: 165.

\(^{25}\) See Ogilvie and Richmond 1967: 165.
history probably of the period of Claudius’ expedition to the island. Tacitus states that Livy and Rusticus give a description of the form of Britain as an *oblonga scapula* or *bipennis* (10.3). Given the coincidence of Caesar’s ethnographic terminology in Livy’s extant work, it is likely that Livy’s lost ethnographic excursuses showed similar influence and helped entrench Caesarian vocabulary in the ethnographic tradition which then passed on to Tacitus.27

**The Ethnographical Tradition in the *Agricola***

Tacitus’ account of Britain was shaped by the accounts of his predecessors, new knowledge obtained during Agricola’s administration of Britain, and the conventions of the ethnographical genre.28 Tacitus’ own admission of why he included the description is revealing. He states that those before him have recorded these ethnographic details in greater detail and more eloquently. He does so now because Agricola has thoroughly conquered the island. Now those things which were described by his predecessors are told with *fide* instead of *eloquentia* (*ita quae priores nondum comperta eloquentia percoluere*, *rerum fide tradentur*, 10.1). What follows, then, are details he felt important to include. The ethnographical accounts greatly contribute to the purpose of his work – the praise of Agricola by relating his famous accomplishments.

Tacitus starts his ethnographic excursus by describing the physical geography of the area (*situs*). Here we see the fixed ethnographical form for indicating the position of the territory — *situs* plus the genitive: *Britanniae situm populosque*, 10.1. Because it formally marks off the preceding chapters of the work detailing Agricola’s life up until his governorship of Britain, the

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26 Ogilvie and Richmond 1967: 167-8, n.10.3.


28 In discussing of the ethnographic details of his account, the scope of the analysis will be limited to the literary representation of Britain instead of actual accuracy of detail.
treatment of geography in the beginning, though usual in ethnographical writings, holds a place of special importance. Not only is the location emphasized to give context for the description of the inhabitants according to anthrogeographical theory, but its description as a remote outpost compared to the world known by the Romans will be a theme that reoccurs throughout the *Agricola* and provides a unique backdrop to his accomplishments. In regards to geography, Tacitus closely follows his models Caesar, Strabo, and Pomponius Mela. Its insularity is emphasized (*Britannia insularum quas Romana notitia complectitur maxima*, 10.2), and especially its position in a vast and open sea (*vasto atque aperto*, 10.3). This phrase is common in Latin literature and was probably copied from Caesar (*B Gall* 3.9, 7). The image of the sea especially serves to portray Britain as located at the extremity of the world, not easily approached by sea (*sed mare pigrum et grave remigantibus*, 10.5) and is also a dominant geographical feature (10.6):

*nusquam latius dominari mare, multum fluminum huc atque illuc ferre, nec litore tenus adrecere aut resorberi, sed influere penitus atque ambire, et iugis etiam ac montibus inseri velut in suo.*

Nowhere does the sea more widely dominate: many rivers flow here and there, nor do they swell or ebb up to the shore but they flow deep within and encircle the land and even flow into the hills and mountains just as into their own territory.

Such a description of an inhospitable sea in an ethnographic account is also found in Sallust’s *Jugurtha* (*mare saevum importuosum*, *Iug* 17). The influence of the ethnographical tradition on the geographic description of Britain also appears in Tacitus’ account. We can trace from his predecessors the same flawed idea of Britain being directly west of Spain, a notion made all the more curious, since when Tacitus was writing this account, Britain had already been

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29 See Ogilvie and Richmond 1967: 167 n.10.2.

30 Cf. Caes. *B Gall* 5.13, Strabo 4.5, Plin. *NH* 4.102. Tacitus erroneously believed that Spain was west of Britain. Hutton 1914: 42 writes that “The error of conceiving Spain as West of Britain, in spite of the testimony of the explorer Pytheas (c. 325 BC) accepted by Eratosthenes (c. 250 BC), lasted until the second century after Christ.”
circumnavigated during Agricola’s administration (10.4). Tacitus however adds new knowledge obtained during Agricola’s time there to his accounts. Included is the shape of Scotland, the description of the Forth Clyde isthmus, and the sighting of Thule, once thought legendary by previous writers, but confirmed by Agricola (10.4). As will be discussed in the next chapter, these new accomplishments further serve to augment Agricola’s prestige. The invocation of this image of Britain as the furthest extreme can only serve to augment Agricola’s accomplishments as the one who secured the complete conquest (perdomitia) of the island, a feat unmatched by his predecessors.

Ogilvie and Richmond give great insight into Tacitus’ account of the geography of Britain. Verified through modern archaeological research, Tacitus’ account is surprisingly accurate. But Ogilvie and Richmond believe that the account of the geography and peoples inhabiting the island is disappointing for its lack of detail. Tacitus only employs geographical terms when the narrative demands them and is sparing in his lists of names of physical features and tribes. Moreover, the place names we find in the work do not extend beyond the territory covered by Agricola’s campaigns. Ogilvie and Richmond’s observation supports the idea that Tacitus only included details he felt were important to the overall purpose of the work. He was not looking for ethnographical detail but for characteristics of Britain and its people that will help him highlight Agricola and his accomplishments.

In chapter 11, the ethnographic form continues in the account of the inhabitants of Britain. He questions whether or not they are indigenous or immigrants. This is a common concern in

31 Ogilvie and Richmond 1967: 35.
32 Ogilvie and Richmond 1967: 35.
33 Ogilvie and Richmond 1967: 45.
ethnographical literature and occurs in the *Germania* (*Germ.* 2.1) and Sallust (*Iug.* 17.7). Tacitus believes that the Britons are an immigrant race because of the similarity of their physical features to those of the Germans, Gauls, and Spaniards. Tacitus follows the model of anthropogeography when trying to explain their origins. He states that the physiques of the peoples show a great variety according to their location and can be explained in the following way: the inhabitants of Caledonia display a German origin because of their red hair and large limbs; their curly hair and what he thought was the proximity of Spain to Britain led him to believe that the Silures were descendants of people from the Iberian peninsula; those people who live near the part of the island that is closest to Gaul were also like the Gauls (*proximi Gallis et similes sunt*, 11.2). This, he explains, is either because of heredity (*originis vi*) or because of climatic conditions (*caeli corporibus habitum dedit*, 11.3). Caesar relates a slightly different tale in which those living in the interior are thought to have been born on the island itself (*quos natos in insula ipsi memoria proditum*, *B Gall.* 5.12). The inhabitants are compared to the Gauls with whom they have much in common, such as their ceremonies, religious beliefs, and the similarity of language, but the Britains are described as fiercer in spirit (*plus tamen ferociae Britanni praefrent*, 11.4). Their quarrelsome nature and lack of purpose (*quod in commune non consulunt*, 12.2) make them easy prey for conquest (*ita singuli pugnant, universi vincuntur*, 12.2). Tacitus makes important observations in describing what he sees are key characteristics of the Britons which will come into play in the subsequent chapters. By giving these ethnographical details before he relates the history of Agricola’s governorship, we are better able to understand the context of the nature of the people that Agricola faced.

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34 Ogilvie and Richmond 1967: 174 n. 11.1.
35 See above n. 22
In the beginning of chapter 12, Tacitus treats the political, military, and social organization of the Britons. In this respect, he is heavily indebted to Caesar, who was the first to describe these institutions. He states that their strength lies in their infantry (*in pedite robur*, 12.1) and alludes to the use of chariots in war (*curru proeliantur*, 12.1). This is a custom of the Britons that Caesar marveled at. He described their zeal for chariot fighting in the *Bellum Gallicum* (*B Gall*. 4.33). He even brought into the Latin vocabulary the specialized term for chariot found in ancient Britain, *essedum*. This term passed into mainstream Latin after its introduction by Caesar, and we find it used in the widely in Latin literature from the time of Cicero on.\(^{36}\)

Curiously, Tacitus did not use this term in the *Agricola*. Tacitus did use Caesar’s terms to describe the political organization of the inhabitants of Britain. He refers to ‘chieftains’ (*principes*) who now govern the different tribes of Britain and refers to the quarreling among them that has led to division amongst their tribes (12.1). *Princeps* is also a term that Caesar used to denote tribal leading men, either elected or ones holding high rank.\(^{37}\) The overall picture that Tacitus leaves us in regard to their social and political institutions is that of disarray and disorder. There is no one unifying force nor is their military strength sufficiently united to repel an attack from an organized military machine like the Roman army. Indeed his pronouncement that Rome’s most powerful weapon against the Britons is their disunity (*nec aliud adversus validissimas gentes pro nobis utilius*, 12.2) foreshadows Agricola’s success in the subsequent chapters.

The rest of chapter 12 rounds out the ethnographical excursus by describing the climate, agriculture, and mineral resources of the island. The climate is described in unappealing terms

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\(^{37}\) Bell 1995: 759. See n. 30 for all occurrences of this word and its connotations in Caesar.
(caelum crebris imribus ac nebulis foedum, 12.3). However, the cold is weather is bearable (asperitas frigorum abest, 12.3). Tacitus also describes the same thaumasia that marveled previous writers on Britain, namely the shortness of the days. These are beyond the measurement of the (Roman) world (dierum spatia ultra nostri orbis mensuram, 12.3). Caesar in the Bellum Gallicum also describes this wonder and states that some even go so far to say that during the winter solstice, it is night on some of the British Isles for 30 consecutive days (nonnulli scripserunt dies continuos triginta sub bruma esse noctem, 5.13). This prompted Caesar to conduct his own experiments in which his staff concluded that the nights were shorter than on the continent (breviores esse quam in continenti noctes, 5.13).

As for agriculture, the land is full of cattle and fertile, being able to produce crops except for those that thrive in warmer climates (praeter oleam vitemque, 12.5). The minerals mentioned by Tacitus are noteworthy because the only ones he names specifically are silver and gold (fert Britannia aurum et argentum et alia metalla, 12.6). Because of their presence, he states that the island is worthwhile for conquest (pretium victoriae, 12.6). There is a major and curious omission. We know from previous accounts on Britain that tin was an important export from the island, and there was an active trade route that the Greeks and Carthaginians employed as early as the 4th century BCE. Herodotus referred to Britain as the Κασσίτερίδαι, or tin-bearing islands (Hdt. 3.115). Tacitus mentions that sea around Britain produces pearls which were only gathered when they washed ashore instead of being actively collected (12.6). Caesar is said to have coveted the pearls found in Britain. Suetonius reports that there was a rumor that he invaded Britain for that very reason: Britanniam petisse spe margaritarum, quarum amplitudinem conferentem interdum sua manu exegisse pondus, lul. 47. The epigram at the end

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of the chapter makes a comparison between the quality of the pearls and the avarice of the Romans. The theme of Roman greed is echoed in Calgacus’ speech to his troops before the battle of Mons Graupius, one which will be explored later (30.4). Tacitus probably mentions these items specifically to conjure up the image of luxus and its subsequent role on the mores of the peoples of Britain.

**Conclusion**

The landscape and character of the people that inhabit Britain are expounded in full ethnographic form preceding the account of Agricola’s exploits on that island. Beyond being an account for mere expository purposes, the ethnographical sections of the *Agricola* serve an important and distinct literary purpose. Not only are there themes that are introduced in these sections that will be echoed throughout the work, but they serve as an important comparison to the actions of the Romans on the island and, to a greater extent, Agricola who is now the governor and commander-in-chief. The image of Britain, just as O’Gorman asserts about Germany in the *Germania*, is more a reflection of Rome. In this way, the image of Britain serves as a mirror through which the reader may ponder and reflect on the deeds of Agricola. As Routledge states, “The result of such a presentation, in the end, is to reduce Britain to a backdrop against which Roman values are reaffirmed, and the Britons themselves are constructed in such a way to constitute little more than an act of self-reflection about the role of men like Tacitus and Agricola under the principate.” The portrait he paints of an island that will inevitably be subdued (*universi vincuntur*, 12.2) is fertile ground for the exploits of an illustrious man such as Agricola. By using the conventions of ethnography Tacitus invites the reader to learn about the

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39 O’Gorman 1993: 140.

40 Rutledge 2000: 84.
stage where his father-in-law earned his reputation. The alien and unfamiliar territory is made more accessible by the formulaic character of ethnography. In the next chapter, we will see how the genre of ethnography complements the biography of Agricola.
CHAPTER 5
THE INTERACTION OF ETHNOGRAPHY AND BIOGRAPHY

As we have seen, the _Agricola_ blends a variety of styles characteristic of several genres in classical literature. How then do we classify Tacitus’ work? Does it indeed defy classification or should the modern reader take Tacitus’ own words at face value and simply describe it as a biography? Does categorizing it change our interpretation of it? By looking at the generic elements within the Agricola and their literary tradition, we can gain insight on how to interpret the seemingly disparate elements within the _Agricola_ and how they affect its purpose. If we can determine Tacitus’ purpose and how these elements contribute to it, we can see how successful he is in achieving his goal. As the previous chapters have shown, biography is a genre closely related to historiography and very often blended elements of the two. Ethnography also is closely related to historiography, formed integral parts of histories, geographies, and military commentaries, and up until Tacitus’ _Germania_, these works were its primary form of dissemination in the ancient world. Therefore the appearance of ethnography in the _Agricola_ is not as unconventional as some might suggest. On the contrary, it serves an important literary function and is an integral part of the work. By using the generic elements of ethnography, Tacitus sets up a mirror in which the exploits of Agricola can be compared and which contributes directly to the virtuous and illustrious portrait he draws of his father-in-law.

Returning to Ogilvie and Richmond, let us evaluate their assertion that the _Agricola_ is a biography. They do indeed have ample grounds for so classifying it. The main focus of the work is the character of Agricola. Therefore, though there are several literary traditions working in this one text, the label, if needed, is best applied to reflect the dominant theme of the work. However, one should not take for granted its heterogeneous nature. Conte’s discussion of genre in Latin literature helps contextualize this situation. Genre, Conte explains, “select(s) and
emphasize(s) certain features of the world in preference to others” and “suggests the general meaning of the individual texts and the audience to whom they are directed.” Moreover, he notes the futility of defining genres in too rigid a fashion since they naturally shift and overlap. However, he notes, any combination of literary forms and structures in ancient literature, no matter how complex and disparate they are, “always respects a single discursive project … A single genre predominates and thus subordinates to itself all the elements that come together to make up the text.” He notes the intertextual relationship among works of Latin literature saying that this process of “stealing bits of texts and individual stylistic features” was a phenomenon of which ancient commentators were well aware. This is not to discount generic studies. It is Cairns’ astute observation that by looking at genre, the modern reader can appreciate how the author chooses to work within it. In addition, we can better understand the inherent ‘agreed contract,’ or generic expectation, between the author and his reader, since this context is naturally lost because of the lack of shared background since we are so far removed from the time period.

The ancient biographic form, as we have seen, did not have set rules of composition. Biography is a prime example of the difficulty of applying a strict definition upon its generic form. Modern scholars stress its flexibility as a genre. Moreover ethnographical writings, though formulaic in nature, could be incorporated into various types of works. Does the confluence of these two seemingly disparate genres hinder the reader’s awareness of what is going on? Certainly not. We see this phenomenon in the poetic genres, one of its manifestations being that

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2 See Derrida 1980 and Barchiesi 2001 (specifically for classical literature) on generic ‘mixing.’
3 Conte 1994: 5.
during the archaic and classical periods, the Greeks used the elegiac meter primarily to commemorate the dead or to express political opinion. By the Hellenistic period however it was used for a different variety of subjects and was already developed as a vehicle for love themes.\(^5\)

Having recognized the different traditions working in the text, we can now get a better understanding and appreciate what these generic elements, far from being disparate and at odds with each other, bring to the table as far as helping the author achieve his purpose.

We know that Tacitus was working within the tradition of laudatory biography akin to those he cites of Rusticus Arulenus and Herennius Senecio (2.1). In addition, he closely follows the historical style of his predecessors of Livy and Sallust. Unfortunately, a great hindrance which keeps the modern reader and scholar alike from properly pondering the implications of deviations from certain generic elements is that so many of historiographical writings from the classical period are lost.\(^6\) Tacitus mentions Livy’s regrettably lost 105\(^{th}\) book as a source for his ethnographic description of Britain. It is clear however that Tacitus had a strong ethnographical interest as evidenced in his subsequent work the *Germania*, the only surviving solely ethnographic work in Greco-Roman literature up until that time, and the discursion on the Jews in the fifth book of the *Historiae* (*Hist.* 5.2-13).\(^7\)

Tacitus’ ‘digression’ on the ethnography of Britain mirrors that of Sallust in the *Bellum Jurgurthinum* (*Iug.* 17-19) in form and function. In form, it adheres to the established formula of ethnographical writing. Functionally, the ethnographical description is used to elaborate on the character of the land, which provides a literary parallel to the Numidians and Jugurtha himself. It establishes these two entities as the Roman ‘other’ – both foreign (*externae*) but at the same time equally ‘Roman’.

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\(^5\) Farrell 2003: 397.

\(^6\) See Pagán 2007 for a discussion of allusions within historiographical works.

\(^7\) For the discussion on the peculiar nature of Tacitus’ ethnographical excursion on the Jews see Bloch 2000.
time a source of comparison to the actions of the Romans. It also serves to divide the work into climactic sections. The excursus follows the account of Jugurtha’s rise to power and precedes the climactic end of his consolidation of power when he kills his brother for sole authority. As Kraus and Woodman state, the ethnographical description along with the discussion of the nature of political parties at Rome “brackets” the complex interaction between Jugurtha and Rome.\textsuperscript{8} In this respect, Sallust is modeling his ethnographic excursus on Thucydides’ Sicilian digression (Thuc. 6.1-5) which functions not only to elaborate on the landscapes that he describing, but as a transitional tool, and a mode to introduce themes which later become important to the narrative.\textsuperscript{9} Ethnographical excursuses in Greek historiographical works were quite common. The manner in which they were used was, as Ogilvie and Richmond state, to “heighten suspense and to focus attention on the drama which is about to unfold.”\textsuperscript{10} Tacitus fashions the excursus into British ethnography in a similar fashion with the same intent. The apparent digression serves to mark off the peak of Agricola’s rise to power and his elevation to the governorship of Britain. It also introduces the account of his exploits in Britain. We can see from Tacitus’ functional model that the historian looked back on his historiographical predecessors and mimicked their style to achieve the same effect in his narrative. In the same way that ethnography served various purposes in the \textit{Bellum Jurgurthinum}, so Tacitus modeled his inclusion of it as a literary tool into his work. Though Tacitus’ is a work of a different genre, nevertheless it achieved the same effect.

\begin{footnotes}
\item[9] Scanlon 1980: 133.
\item[10] Ogilvie and Richmond 1965: 701. Cf. Liv. 5.33.4-35 for a similar effect that Livy achieves with his treatment of the Gauls.
\end{footnotes}
By establishing that he modeled his account with this effect in mind, let us explore how ethnography brings out the themes found in the biography of Agricola. Paramount to Tacitus’ characterization of Agricola are the people and landscape of Britain. They are both set as the ‘other’ and therefore function as a comparison and contrasting force in the story. Both are described in an abstract sense – no major characters emerge amongst the Britons, unlike that of Jurgurtha in Sallust’s work. Though Boudicca and Calgacus are described as strong leaders, their achievements and accomplishments are treated in rudimentary manner and only serve as background, giving context to Agricola’s governorship of the island. The Britons’ character as a collective whole described in the ethnographic section of the work is repeatedly contrasted with that of the Romans.

Also, the landscape of Britain plays a special role in characterizing the inhabitants of Britain. Their remoteness and insularity sets them apart from peoples like the Gauls and Germans and therefore is an integral part of their identity. These factors also serve to shield and protect them from the ‘corrupting’ influences of the Roman world. Moreover, their landscape in the Roman mind, occupied furthest reaches of the known world. The barrier between Britain and Europe is a vast and rough sea – a formidable boundary which the Romans only penetrated with much difficulty and had to do so repeatedly to finally gain a tenable foothold on the island.

Indeed after Rome’s first contact with Britain by Caesar, Romans were fascinated by this ‘final frontier’ and allude to it in their literature. Catullus emphasized the remoteness of the province: Quis hoc potest videre...Mamurram habere quod comata Gallia habebat ante et ultima Britannia?, 29.1-4; Caesaris visens monimenta magni / Gallicum Rhenum, horribile aequor ulti /mosque Britannos, 11.10-2. Ovid refers to the conquest of Britain in the Metamorphoses in a sly ploy to contrast the achievements of Julius Caesar to Augustus: scilicet aequoreos plus est.
domuisse Britannos ... quam tantum genuisse uirum?, Met. 15.752. Horace also refers to Britain as occupying the furthest extremes of the earth (serves iturum Caesarem in ultimos orbis Britannos, Carm. 1.35.29-30) and suggests that when Augustus, who for a time considered sending an expedition to Britain, conquers the province, he will be considered a god: Caelo tonantem credidimus Iovem / regnare: praesens divus habebitur / Augustus adiectis Britannis / imperio., Carm. 3.5.1-4. It was finally during Claudius’ reign that the Romans gained a permanent foothold on the island. We are told that during Claudius’ expedition, the troops under the general Aulus Plautius had to be dissuaded from mutiny because they feared crossing the ocean into such unfamiliar territory, the limits of the known world.11 As Routledge and Clarke point out, the geographical details of Britain are of the utmost importance in Agricola’s characterization.12 The characterization of the people and landscape through ethnography carried with it certain connotations that Tacitus employed in his work, the components of which, Thomas states, Tacitus used in ‘subtle’ and ‘artistic’ ways.13

Moreover, pertinent to the Agricola’s biographical theme, ethnography acts as a mirror in which concepts of Roman identity, values, and virtue are reflected and analyzed.14 Hartog, in his study of ethnographical writings in Herodotus, sees ethnographical excursuses in Herodotean narrative as providing a mirror to concepts of ‘Greekness.’ In this way, no less, the ethnography serves as a mirror to the themes in the Agricola of demonstration of virtue and the avoidance of vice, themes pertinent to the genre of the laudatory biography.

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12 Rutledge 2000: n.48; Clarke 2001. Both Rutledge and Clarke refute Ogilvie’s assertion that the geographic details contained in the Agricola are ‘largely incidental’ to the biographical and rhetorical subject matter.
The predominant theme throughout Tacitus’ work is the demonstration of Roman *virtus*. What are the deeds of someone who is worthy of emulation? How can good men display courage and fortitude during the reign of a depraved despot? Tacitus’ version of *virtus* is closely modeled after that of Sallust – that is, according to Donald Earl, “the use of *ingenium* to achieve *egregia facinora* and thus to win *gloria* by the exercise of *bonae artes* – including energy (*industria*), hard work (*labor*), integrity (*fides*).”\(^\text{15}\) This conception closely resembles the traditional Roman aristocratic notion, except that Sallust’s is ‘a self-made quality’ which does not depend on aristocratic status or chosen activity.\(^\text{16}\) This theme appears prominently in the *Agricola*, especially with the allusion in the beginning of the work to Cato’s *Origines*. During Tacitus’ time, when the emperor reigned supreme, however, the manner and sphere in which a Roman could demonstrate his *virtus* by service to the state was, according to Martin, “decisively circumscribed.”\(^\text{17}\)

*Agricola* is a man worthy of praise because he has displayed extraordinary virtue though living and operating under a bad ruler. Tacitus’ description of *Agricola* in the beginning chapters shows that before he went to Britain he had already formed the virtuous character that would serve him well during his time abroad.\(^\text{18}\) He displays all of the *bonae artes* throughout his life.

Early in his career, he was known for his hard work and energy (5.1):

\[
\text{nec Agricola licenter, more iuvenum qui militiam in lasciviam vertunt, neque segniter …}
\]
\[
sed noscere provinciam, nosci exercitui, discere a peritis, sequi optimos, nihil adpetere in iactationem, nihil ob formidinem recusare simulque et anxius et intentus agere.}
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\(^\text{15}\) Earl 1961: 28.


\(^\text{17}\) Martin 1981: 25.

\(^\text{18}\) Cf. Ogilvie and Richmond 1967: 19 “The ancients, not least Tacitus, believed that character was fixed, that a man is at any one point in his life what he always was and always will be.”
Neither was Agricola extravagant, as is the custom of youths who turn their military service into lascivious sport, nor was he half-hearted ... he rather sought to know the province, to be known by the army, to learn from the skilled, to follow the best of men, to seek nothing by boasting, to reject nothing out of fear and at the same time to be careful yet eager.

At the same time he is described as having retained proportion out of wisdom: *retinuitque, quod est difficillimum, ex sapientia modum*, 4.3. After the ethnographic description, the relationship he has with Britain plays an important role in showing how Agricola displays his *virtus*. He deals equitably with his new subjects but he is still an extremely effective commander. He took an interest in their plight and was determined to eliminate the causes of war.

Virtue is not the only characteristic celebrated. Tacitus also describes the benevolence of Agricola towards his subjects: *Ceterum animorum provinciae prudens, simulque doctus per aliena experimenta parum profici armis, si iniuriae sequerentur, causas bellorum statuit excidere*, 19.1. Therefore even those he sought to conquer looked upon him as a brilliant and great man (*clarus ac magnus haberi Agricola*, 18.5). His *industria* is displayed when, even though faced with many hindrances, he resolved to take firm action as a military leader, a contrast to the commanders who preceeded him such as Trebellius Maximus (*segnior*, 16.3) or Petronius Turpilianus (*mitior*, 16.3) (18.2):

> cum Agricola, quamquam transvecta aestas, sparsi per provinciam numeri, praesumpta apud militem illius anni quies, tarda et contraria bellum incohature, et plerisque custodiri suspecta potius videbatur, ire obviam discriminì statuit;

Whereas Agricola, although a summer had elapsed, although a number of his troops were strewn throughout the province, although a year of rest had already been consumed amongst the soldiers – things that delay and hinder someone about to set out for war, and although it seemed to many that the mistrusted provinces should instead be guarded, he decided to head in upon the crisis.

Tacitus stresses how Agricola ruled equitably, so that after years of tumult and turmoil, peace once again returned to Britain: *Haec primo statim anno comprimendo egregiam famam paci circumdedit, quae vel incuria vel intolerantia priorum haud minus quam bellum timebatur*, 20.1.
He tried to combat the restiveness and lack of purpose of the Britons through public works and positive reinforcement (21.1):

Sequens hiemis saluberrimis consiliis absumpta. Namque ut homines dispersi ac rudes eoque in bella faciles quieti et otio per voluptates adsuescerent, hortari privatim, adiuvare publice, ut tempora fora domos extruerent, laudando promptos, castigando segnes: ita honoris aemulatio pro necessitate erat.

The following winter was passed in accordance with very sound strategies. For in order that men scattered and uncivilized, for that very reason quick to enter upon wars, might grow accustomed to peace and leisure through comfort, he encouraged individuals and assisted communities by praise of the eager, by chastisement of the slackers, so that they might build temples, forums and houses: thus there was rivalry for his regard instead of a feeling of obligation.

He even introduces the Britons to the liberal arts (iam vero principum filios liberalibus artibus erudire, 21.2), recalling the importance of his own early education (4.3). Such deeds stand in stark contrast to Domitian whom Tacitus describes as secretly jealous of Agricola for his fame because the name of a commoner was exalted above that of a princeps: privati hominis nomen supra principis attolli, 39.2. The qualities of a good general, he thought, were imperial qualities, out of the realm of someone from Agricola’s class: cetera utcumque facilius dissimulari, ducis boni imperatoriam virtutem esse, 29.2-3. Agricola however is someone that Tacitus thinks has proved his virtus in the face of adversity, irrespective of class, and through his ingenium.

Agricola’s virtus stands in contrast to the avarice of other Romans. Roman morality is put to the test in the far reaches of Britain and Tacitus holds up the mirror to criticize such aspects of Roman civilization. The Britons, though clearly inferior to the Romans, nevertheless are free from such vices until the intrusion of Roman customs into their way of life. For instance, Tacitus states that when Agricola started his program of introducing Roman customs to the Britons, they started going astray into alluring vices: paulatimque discessum ad delenimenta vitiorum ... idque apud imperitos humanitas vocabatur, cum par servitutis esset, 21.2. These were actually part of their servitude. Interestingly, the Britons in the end realized that the only
way to throw off the yoke of the Roman invaders was to emulate the virtue of their forefathers: *recessuros, ut divus Iulius recessisset, modo virtutem maiorum suorum aemularentur*, 15.4. Virtue could set the Britons apart from the excesses and vices of their oppressors. The Romans in Britain are cast as fighting only for greed and *luxuria* (15.4), as the speech of Calgacus so eloquently illustrates (30.5):

> si locuples hostis est, avari, si pauper, ambitiosi, quos non Oriens, non Occidens satiaverit: soli omnium opes atque inopiam pari adfectu concupiscunt. Auferre trucidare rapere falsis nominibus imperium, atque ubi solitudinem faciunt, pacem appellant.

If the enemy is wealthy, they are greedy, if the enemy is poor, they are ambitious—the East, the West did not satisfy them: alone out of all people they covet wealth and scarcity with equal affection. To steal, slaughter, plunder, with these false names they call power and where they make desolation, they call it peace.

Such a commentary on the character of the Romans from the mouth of a Briton reflects Tacitus’ criticism of such qualities and stands in contrast to those of Agricola. Tacitus uses the ‘other’ to make the criticism even more poignant. As O’Gorman states in her article ‘Identity and Difference in the *Germania* of Tacitus,’ Tacitus uses this approach in the *Germania* as well:

> The shift of Roman morality into the German sphere is a product of the unsatisfactory political situation at Rome itself … this representation of Rome as strange and divergent is a strong feature of subsequent Tacitean writing, and we see it here reflected in the representation of a foreign land, traditional repository of the strange and divergent, now a refuge of the familiar.\(^{19}\)

The land and people of Briton are used to contrast what Tacitus criticizes in the principate. Again, Agricola’s superior character shines through because of his exemplary demonstration of *virtus*.

The interaction between ethnography and biography in the *Agricola* activates allusions from Latin literature that help enhance the characterization of Agricola as a great leader. Inherent in ethnography is a salient intertextuality. We have seen how authors have adhered to

\(^{19}\) O’Gorman 1993: 148.
the ethnographic convention of writing and allude directly or indirectly to the information contained in previous ethnographies, not only by the repetition of knowledge but in diction and style. Tacitus in addition uses ethnography in a similar manner as his predecessor Sallust to mark off a key point in the narrative and introduce thematic material. The formulaic nature of ethnography lends itself to this intertextuality. And indeed it is for this reason that Thomas uses ethnography as a guide to interpret poetry since any deviation from the established and accepted pattern carries certain significance.\(^{20}\) For Tacitus this intertextuality serves yet another purpose. The ethnographic allusions in his text bring out Agricola’s characterization as a great leader by equating his accomplishments with those of distinguished Romans of the past.

By conjuring up the vocabulary and subject matter of Agricola’s famous predecessor Caesar, Tacitus implies a comparison of his accomplishments on the island with this illustrious figure. Indeed the similarities are striking.\(^{21}\) The way Tacitus refers to Caesar in his narrative is noteworthy. He calls him ‘first of all Romans’ which, in this context, can be taken to mean the first to enter Britain or, in manner that recalls Augustus’ title of *princeps*, the foremost Roman (13.2):

\[
\text{Igitur *primus omnium Romanorum* divus Iulius cum exercitu Britanniam ingressus, quamquam prospera pugna terruerit incolas ac litore potitus sit, potest videri ostendisse posteris, non tradidisse. [emphasis my own]}
\]

Therefore the first of all Romans, divine Caesar after entering Britain with his army, although he frightened the inhabitants with a successful battle and acquired the shore of the island, he is able to be seen as showing Britain to his descendants, rather than handing it over.

Caesar is described as having overawed Britain’s inhabitants with his swift and successful subjugation of the coast. Tacitus, though, seems to imply that Caesar’s accomplishment was

\(^{20}\) Thomas 1982: 5.

\(^{21}\) See Couissin 1932 on the comparison between Agricola and Julius Caesar.
more to lay the foundation for his successors, ones worthy of matching his feat: *potest videri ostendisse posteris, non tradidisse*, 13.2. These successors did not include the likes of Augustus and Tiberius whom he characterized as being reluctant to bring to fruition the conquest of Britain: *ac longa oblivio Britanniae etiam in pace: consilium id divus Augustus vocabat, Tiberius praeceptum*, 13.2. We know that Augustus debated on whether or not to invade Britain between the years 27 and 24 BCE.\(^{22}\) Tacitus states that Augustus was ‘unstable’ (*ingenio mobili*) in his resolution and he referred to his failures in Germany. It was left up to Claudius to finally make lasting inroads into this territory with the help of Vespasian. In a sentence that mimics the swift succession of events and alluding to their superior military capabilities, Tacitus recounts Claudius’ conquest, which for Vespasian was his first step to fame (13.3):

> Divus Claudius auctor tanti operis, transvectis legionibus auxiliisque et adsumpto in partem rerum Vespasiano, quod initium venturae mox fortunae fuit: domitae gentes, capti reges et monstratus fatis Vespasianus.

Divine Claudius instigated such a great undertaking: the legions and the auxiliary troops crossed (the Channel) and Vespasian assumed command of part of the mission—this was the beginning of the fortune soon to come to him—tribes were conquered, kings captured, and Vespasian was introduced to destiny.

Although Claudius and Vespasian are portrayed as noteworthy leaders, Tacitus makes the reader aware that it was only under Agricola that Britain was totally subdued—a feat unmatched by the previous Caesars.

The military language used to describe Agricola’s campaigns also call to mind Caesar’s *commentarii* style of writing. For instance, we see more frequent use of ablative absolutes in this part of the narrative, although these are used less frequently in Sallust, Livy and Tacitus.\(^{23}\) In

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\(^{22}\) See Mommsen 1954 on Augustus and Britain.

\(^{23}\) Albrecht 1989: 60.
this passage cited earlier, Tacitus demonstrates the decisive action Agricola takes in the face of many hindrances when he first crossed over into Britain (18.2):

> cum Agricola, quamquam transvecta aestas, sparsi per provinciam numeri, praesumpta apud militem illius anni quies, tarda et contraria bellum incohatur, et plerisque custodiri suspecta potius videbatur, ire obviam discrimini statuit;

It is marked by a crescendo of the obstacles that Agricola faced before he decided to take determined action. This use of the ablative absolute to emphasize the functional relationship among these actions and the whole sentence, and the finite verb to denote the resolution are characteristic of how Caesar portrays his actions in the *Bellum Gallicum*.24 Elsewhere in the account of Agricola’s military exploits in Britain, Tacitus refers to how Agricola marched with his soldiers to inspire courage—another nod to Caesar during his campaigns in Gaul.25 Ogilvie and Richmond state that such a comparison (σύγκρισις) “was indispensable” and in the spirit of laudatory biography.26 These veiled allusions to Caesar demonstrate Tacitus’ skill in artfully portraying his father-in-law as a great general and commander.

Another aspect of this intertextuality occurs in the speeches of Calgacus and Agricola before the battle of Mons Graupius (c.30-4). The ethnographic trope of Britain as the farthest extreme of the world comes heavily into play in these speeches. Calgacus reminds his soldiers that there is no other land behind them, and their very seas, which before had protected them from foreign invasion, are being threatened by the Romans: *et nullae ultra terrae ac ne mare quidem securum inminente nobis classe Romana*, 30.1. This tribe of Britain, the Caledonians who live in the innermost part of Britain, has overcome what Tacitus related earlier was the Britons’ most serious weakness—they have now banded together to repel a common threat.

Calgacus states that their very isolation has saved them from slavery and tyranny at the hands of the Romans: *nos terrarum ac libertatis extremos recessus ipse ac sinus famae in hunc diem defendit*, 30.3. Their landscape can now no longer protect them.

The pair of speeches recalls the speeches that Hannibal and P. Cornelius Scipio, father of Scipio Africanus, gave to their troops before the battle of Ticinus (Liv. 21.40-3). Before the battle, Hannibal gave a speech of exhortation to his troops who had just crossed the Alps into Italy. He speaks of having no other retreat—they must conquer or die since they are enclosed on both sides by the seas: *Dextra laeuaque duo maria claudunt nullam ne ad effugium quidem nauem habentes*, Liv. 21.43.4. The roles of Roman and foreigner are reversed between the two situations, since it is Agricola who reminds his troops about the great distance they have traveled and that there is no real means of escape—it is more glorious to die here in Britain on the edges of the earth: *nec inglorium fuerit in ipso terrarium ac naturae fine cecidisse*, Agr. 33.6.

Calgacus’s speech is also reminiscent of Scipio’s because it is the Romans who must now fight against an enemy that threatens their shores: *hic est obstandum, milites, uelut si ante Romana moenia pugnemus*, Liv. 21.40.15-6. In both works, the landscape plays an important role in characterizing the nature and defining the stakes of the battle.

Moreover, Calgacus is cast as a worthy opponent, one who speaks with Roman refinement and calls to mind virtues that Agricola himself embodies. We see that before the battle of Ticinus, both Hannibal and Scipio admired each other for their skill (Liv. 21.39.9). Although there is no explicit mention of Agricola’s and Calgacus’ estimation of each other, Calgacus’ character during the speech demonstrates a man who, though not Roman, espouses Roman ideals. He expresses the criticisms of Roman imperialism that Ogilvie and Richmond state were
voiced in the schools. Ogilvie and Richmond add that Calgacus’ knowledge of the cosmopolitan organization of the Roman army (*quem contractum ex diversissimis gentibus*, 32.1) and the position of the slaves in the household (31.2) presupposes knowledge of Roman society that he would never have had an opportunity to obtain. This illustrates how Tacitus uses the character of Calgacus, the ‘other,’ as a mirror to examine the Roman state whose faults under the principate he repeatedly identifies and criticizes throughout the *Agricola*. Agricola himself embodies what is best about Rome, and the exhortations of the two commanders to their troops and their contrasting themes provide ample material to Tacitus’ Roman readers for reflection.

These characterizations go a long way in helping to preserve the memory of Agricola’s deeds in the minds of the Romans. Tacitus has reinforced Agricola’s prestige and Rome’s by telling the story of his conquests, since by doing so it can be seen as making ‘textual inroads into foreign territories’ which they have conquered. This functions, according to Kraus and Woodman, to reinforce the extension and legitimizing of temporal power. By recounting his conquests in Britain, the country no longer becomes such a foreign and mysterious landscape but a place that the Romans have placed under their control and now a part of their empire. Indeed, in his exhortation to his troops in c. 33, Agricola mimics this notion when he states that having found Britain it was conquered: *inventa Britannia et subacta*, 33.1. Agricola had made many inroads into their territory by his expeditions, civil works, and benevolence towards the Britons whereas his predecessors were only partially successful in their campaigns. His governance and leadership won him praise from both sides and lasting fame. Just as he displays *virtus* in the

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28 Kraus and Woodman 1997: 40.
manner of the illustrious figures he is equated to, so subsequent generations shall remember him as a figure worthy of emulation.

The inclusion of ethnographic details is appropriate for a work which purports to tell the story of a man whose most significant accomplishment was achieved in a foreign land amongst foreign people. Ethnography helps present this required background to the reader in a familiar format and serves a literary purpose by helping to introduce themes that are important to the work as a whole. The confluence of these two genres brings to the forefront a contrast which above all brings out Tacitus’ message in a manner which could not be achieved without the contribution of both. The conventions of these genres complement each other in their ability to record detail that is important for a better understanding of the subject by the inclusion of material that was deemed unsuitable for a ‘proper’ history. The inclusion of ethnography was a deliberate move by Tacitus and should not be considered merely a ‘digression’ from the main aim of the work, but as an integral part of Agricola’s characterization.
In this thesis, I have explored what the special relationship between the genres of ethnography and biography brings to Tacitus’ *Agricola* and how these help his characterization of Agricola as a virtuous man, worthy of emulation in the spirit of laudatory biography. Though criticized for its composite nature, the *Agricola* is a work in which Tacitus weaves with skill and eloquence different traditions whose unique natures serve distinct purposes within his narrative. The tradition of Greco-Roman biography is known for its flexibility. It can readily admit elements of another genre such as ethnography which is so closely allied with its literary cousin, history. The two genres complement each other and shed insight on not only Agricola’s character but on their literary conventions and what they meant to the ancients. Genre was not a rigid classification to which a work had to adhere. Instead, the ancient Greeks and Romans played upon the associations of genre in innovative and unique ways which added to the literary merit of their works.

In addition, we have seen how Tacitus’ style shows a writer already heavily indebted to his historiographic predecessors such as Sallust and Livy. Tacitus’ foray into historiography and ethnography within what purports to be a biography looks forward to his subsequent works the *Germania, Annales* and *Historiae*. Especially in the realm of ethnography, Tacitus’ account of the Britons is heavily influenced by Sallust’s treatment of the Numidians in the *Jurgurtha* and the information contained in Livy’s lost 105th book of the *Ab Urbe Condita*. Such treatment can be considered a starting point for his major contribution to the genre—the *Germania*, which is the only extant example of a work solely ethnographical nature in Greco-Roman antiquity up until that time. We can find no example in the *Agricola* of his profession of speaking with an
incondita ac rudi voce, not with the evidence we see of his skillful adaptation of their style into his work.

As the Agricola shows us, the interplay of different genres in one work has significant meaning not only within the realm of poetry but in that of historiography as well. Allusion and intertextuality between these generic traditions interact with each other to form special relationships, ones that call to mind the authoritative voices of the past. This lends weight not only to Tacitus’ account of the life of his father-in-law by emulating his predecessors but also to the characterization of Agricola himself through associations with venerable figures of the Roman past.

Tacitus’ exercise of filial piety towards his father-in-law gives us a unique portrait of a man who is worthy of emulation, very much in the spirit of the aims of a Roman laudatio funebris, one which depicts a man who demonstrated Roman virtus even under the rule of a despotic leader and who carried out his duties for the state in a manner reminiscent of illustrious figures of the past. Tacitus pays homage to his father-in-law not only by narrating his deeds for posterity but by the skillful way he portrays the man himself. Bringing the details of the lands and peoples of Britain into the narrative was a deliberate step which gave important context to his deeds. One cannot understand Agricola without first being acquainted with the stage on which he achieved his lasting fame. This characterization could never have been achieved without the interaction of the ethnographic genre. Goodyear’s assessment of the ‘questionable’ success of the amalgamation of these traditions into one work is inaccurate. Agricola’s lasting fame is evidence of its success. Lasting character and personal achievement, Tacitus states, are best shown through your own character rather than art. But indeed Tacitus’ skillful portrayal
renders the prediction at the end of the *Agricola* (*Agricola posteritati narratus et traditus superstes erit*, 46.4) true for this very reason.
LIST OF REFERENCES


Hardai Soraya Patricia Jadoo was born December 22, 1980, in New York, New York. The youngest of three children, she grew up in the Bronx and moved to Miami, Florida, when she was nine years old. There she graduated from Miami Killian Sr. High in 1998 and attended Florida International University in Miami before enrolling in the University of Florida. She earned her B.A. at the University of Florida graduating *cum laude* with a double major in anthropology and classical studies.

Before enrolling in her master’s program, Hardai worked at the University of Florida’s International Center as assistant to the Executive Associate Director. There her duties included helping establish agreements with foreign universities and providing support to international students and faculty at UF.

Upon completion of her master’s program, she plans to teach Latin at the secondary school level. She is engaged to Kevin Campbell and lives in Gainesville, Florida.
Ethnographers are forced to take on moral and physical risks; indeed, he argues, such research inevitably requires putting oneself in harm's way in both a corporeal and normative sense. The latter is something that Philippe Bourgois wrestles with in his landmark ethnography *In Search of Respect* (1995), when he recounts the occurrence of gang rape among drug dealers in East Harlem. Over a number of years of ethnographic interaction, he had become accustomed to recollections among his key informants of mugging, theft and fights, often over drug-dealing, and he was also all too aware of the negative effects of the crack that the drug dealers sold in East Harlem and beyond. The *Agricola* mixes various literary genres. It is a biography, crossed with a laudatio funebris and with historical and ethnographical material. For this reason, the book contains portions written in different styles. The exordium, the speeches, and the final peroration show strong influence from Cicero, probably derived from Tacitus's own training in rhetoric.