

Exhibition Hall

Die Wiederentdeckung

The Re-Discovery

The writings of the Roman writer and historian, Tacitus, were as good as forgotten in the Middle Ages. In the Renaissance Italian humanists searched through monastery libraries for copies of ancient texts. In about 1450 Tacitus' work on the Germanic tribes, *Germania*, was re-discovered in Hersfeld Abbey; his *Annales* in the monastery of Corvey. In this work he deals with the Romans' wars with the Germanic tribes under Arminius. Tacitus' works were to be the most influential source of information on *Germania* and the Germanic tribes. The first German readers of *Germania* thought that Tacitus had described their own ancestors. This construct, the identification of Germanic people as the progenitors of the German nation, was to determine the self-image of the Germans for centuries.

Die Instrumentalisierung

Instrumentalisation

When *Germania* became generally known in about 1455/60 it was used immediately in the disputes at that time between the Roman church and the German estates. The Roman church countered German complaints that the constant financial demands made by the popes were impoverishing the country: as could be read in Tacitus' writings, Germanic people had been primitive barbarians but now, thanks to the church, Germans lived in prosperity. The emphasis on the "primitive German ancestors" was a challenge to German humanists. They wrote a wealth of commentaries on *Germania* to counter

the reproach that the Germans had been barbarians at one time. Their picture of Germanic life – based on Tacitus' views, projected an image of a "Golden Age" – all in praise of German virtues.

Ein idyllisches Germanenbild

An Idyllic Image of Germanic People

In their comparison of Germanic people and Romans the German humanists defended Germanic simplicity over against Roman luxury as well as the idea of Germanic liberty over against Roman thirst for power. These comments were in part directed against the then Roman church and France.

Thus in many books by German authors an idyllic picture of the Germanic world was drawn, by only positive features being emphasised: Germanic people were an unmixed, powerful, valiant and virtuous people with a natural and simple way of life. The virtues certified by Tacitus confirmed for many the German claim of superiority over other nations.

Ein mythischer Held der Deutschen

A German Mythical Hero

The re-discovery of works by Roman authors made Arminius well known in Germany. Tacitus had introduced Arminius as the liberator of Germania into history – a judgement, from, of all people, a Roman writer, which could not fail to impress German humanists. The process had been triggered by which this Germanic tribesman became the first German hero and the brilliant leader of a Germanic – now German – struggle for liberty which was

being continued in the present day: in the struggle against Rome and the enemies of the Reich, particularly France. From now on the merits of Arminius and the Varus battle were used as arguments in any given political conflict. In 1529 Ulrich von Hutten established the Myth of Arminius as a German war hero. Other humanist authors followed him and established Arminius firmly in the gallery of mythical kings and famous ancestors of the Germans.

Die ersten Arminius-Abbildungen

The First Pictures of Arminius

What did Arminius look like? No image of him from antiquity is extant. Roman accounts of him provide us with only a fragmentary view. The first representations show him as a knight and soldier in 16th century style. The images of Arminius within a series of pictures illustrating German progenitors show him in contemporary clothing and with contemporary weapons. These images depict the first legendary Germanic kings and were intended to prove common descent for all Germans.

Aus Arminius wird Hermann

Arminius Becomes Hermann

The Bavarian historian, Aventinus (1477-1534), is probably responsible for Arminius being called "Hermann". It was, however, Luther who made Arminius well known as "Hermann" (Heer-mann = literally Army-man). All the same, Protestant theologians hesitated to approve of the Germanic leader's "revolt" – in accordance with the Biblical wisdom: "Those that live by the sword die by the sword!" But as the Protestants themselves were in revolt

against the Roman church and the Emperor, they were not able to resist the fascination of the "liberator of the Germans" and victor over Rome.

Literarische Heldenverehrung

Literary Adulation

Literary adulation continued to develop in the 17th and 18th centuries. Numerous novels, poems and historical tracts were written and made Arminius/Hermann into a heroic model for German history. He became a "saviour" in Germany's hour of need. His person was always linked with nostalgia for ancient times when Germany had been free and united, whenever the country was in a state of crisis. This was the case at the time of the Thirty Years' War and during the later wars against France.

Arminius – ein internationaler Opernheld

Arminius – a Hero of International Opera

In the 17th and 18th centuries Arminius enjoyed a career as a hero and gallant lover in international opera. On the basis of French novels and plays several Italian libretti were written which were then put to music by composers such as Franz Biber, Alessandro Scarlatti, Francesco Rinaldi and Georg Friedrich Händel. By 1800 over 50 Arminius operas and operettas had been staged. Personal relations and amorous conflicts dominate the plots in all these adaptations, whilst the historical events form only a distant background story. The Arminius material was of interest for opera houses because it provided a new backcloth: the German forest. This replaced the previously predominant ancient mythological scenery.

Arminius – ein deutscher Theaterheld

Arminius – A German Theatrical Hero

French courtly society set the standard in the 17th and 18th centuries. Germany on the other hand with its numerous single states was regarded as a culturally backward country. German bourgeois patriots called for Germany to dissociate itself from French classicism and courtly aristocracy and to understand itself as a cultural nation of equal value.

At the same time German writers were looking for patriotic material to replace the amorous intrigues of opera. Arminius, the liberator and unifier of Germania, was a prime example of a patriotic hero of national magnitude. The Arminius myth now served a process of cultural and national self-rediscovery. Many patriotic plays and epics were written which had a quite definite effect on public opinion. Those of the poet, Klopstock, shaped the new image of the Germanic world most lastingly and provided a stimulus to numerous artists.

Der Mythos von der Befreiung und Einheit Deutschlands

The Myth of the Liberation and Unity of Germany

The political climate changed after 1806, when Napoleon occupied Germany. The struggle for liberation of the Germanic tribes against Rome became a symbol for German resistance against Napoleon. His attitude politicised the 18th century's understanding of patriotism as a cultural phenomenon. Publicists, artists and poets created a new national conscious with new national symbols from the myths of the past and their hopes for the liberation of Germany. Ernst Moritz Arndt and others

emphasised the model character of Germanic resistance to the Roman occupiers, which had now turned into a "holy mission": a new struggle against France, which had now taken the place of Rome.

Hermanns-Schlachten

Hermann Battles

Heinrich von Kleist wrote his *Die Hermannsschlacht* (The Hermann Battle) in 1808, under the impression of the French occupation of Germany. In it the Cherusian prince appears as an unscrupulous tactician, who calls for guerrilla attacks and a popular uprising against Napoleon's troops. Because of the play's politically explosive nature the play could not be published or performed at once. However, it was later appropriated by nationalist war propagandists, including the National Socialists, for ideological purpose.

Christian Dietrich Grabbe provided his *Hermannsschlacht* (Hermann Battle) of 1835/36 with a great deal of local colour from the Lippe area. In his play not only the heroic figure of Arminius is in the foreground but the Germanic people, too. The battle creates a community of people and leader instantly. Grabbe's play, too, was misused by the National Socialists: as a classic example of the accord between people and leader. This period saw the first performance of the play.

Ein Denkmalheld

A Monumental Hero

In the first half of the 19th century numerous monuments were erected to conjure up the idea of national unity

and to educate Germans in virtue and love of fatherland. As numerous plans show, Hermann and his victory over Roman invaders became, too, material for monuments. Bandel originally conceived his Hermann Monument as a symbol of the unity of Germany. Arminius is regarded as the first unifier of the "German" tribes and as the historical model for the longed for political unification of Germany. Numerous associations and private people gave donations for the building of the monument. The meaning of the monument changed after the formation of the Second Reich in 1871. The raised sword and the inscriptions emphasised a martial tradition which made the Varus Battle, the Wars of Liberation of 1813-1815 and the Franco-Prussian war of 1870/71 into a historical continuum. Emperor Wilhelm I was celebrated as the successor of Arminius.

Hermanns kleiner Bruder

Hermann's Little Brother

In 1897 an American Hermann Monument was inaugurated in New Ulm (Minnesota). It is a copy of the Detmold monument but it is smaller. The initiative originated in an association of German immigrants, the "Sons of Hermann". They first met in 1840 in New York to preserve their German cultural identity and to assure one another mutual assistance in a foreign country. In decades to follow the "Sons of Hermann" spread across America in different lodges – there were a great many in Texas. After the German-American monument increasingly lost importance with the First World War, it is now a tourist attraction again, known across the country.

Einheitstraum und Gründungsmythos

A Dream of Unity and a Myth of Foundation

The failure to create German unity after 1815 and authoritarian conditions in the German Confederation made the Hermann myth into a symbol of hope for the future unity of all Germans in a single state. Historical painting flourished and turned history into powerful pictures.

Hermann and the Varus Battle became the founding legend of the German nation and – after the formation of the Second Reich in 1871 – of that new Empire. The myth was so popular because the transfer of Germanic tribes and Romans to Germany and the “arch-enemy” France was so simple and the connection to the tradition of the Wars of Liberation could so easily be suggested. The new German Reich appeared to be the goal and the culmination of a story which had been going on for thousands of years.

The abundance of representations of Arminius and Germanic people in the fine arts and literature in the late 19th century reflect increasingly arrogant and aggressive nationalism aiming at confrontation with other countries, later with other races.

Die Popularisierung des Mythos

Popularising the Myth

In the second half of the 19th century the Germanic tribes and Arminius enjoyed particular popularity. Many Germans saw their own situation reflected in an idealised picture of early Germanic society and so German history as a

meaningful whole with its culmination in the new imperial Reich. Innumerable novels, plays and more or less curious consumer objects reflect German enthusiasm for the Germanic tribes and the popularity of Arminius.

Arminius und Kollegen

Arminius and Colleagues

Almost every nation in the 19th century constructed justifications for its existence. Mostly it was a matter of conjuring up a glorious past. Practically every European nation defined itself by distinguishing itself from its neighbours: by the great, mythically transfigured, battles and military leaders that had become part of the legends surrounding the original of their own particular nation. Alongside figures from medieval history, particularly ancient heroes became the progenitors of modern nation states. Striking examples: Vercingetorix in France and Civilis and the Batavi, who were regarded by the Dutch as their ancestors. Their myths have found expression in literature and the fine art and have attained a force comparable to Arminius' own.

Arminius als Siegfried

Arminius as Siegfried

During the First World War Arminius/ Hermann became the symbol of German power and strength. After the defeat of 1918 many years of the Weimar Republic were marked by ideological trench-warfare and civil strife between Right and Left. Old and new myths were used to destroy political adversaries. No myth was more important in the Weimar Republic than that of the Nibelungen. The

image of the murdered Siegfried was fused with the myth of the "stab in the back": the German people and the army were not defeated in war but by betrayal from within the society, by democrats and socialists.

Kampf um Lippe

The Struggle for Lippe

A film on the Hermann Battle, shot at original sites in Lippe, was made from 1922 to 1924. It was directed by Dr. Leo König from the Schauspielhaus in Düsseldorf. The main parts were played by very well known actors of the silent film period. About 1000 extras and 150 horses made this production one of the most elaborate in early film history. The Germanic victory over the Romans attained highly political significance in the face of the French occupation of the Ruhr area, inflation and Hitler's putsch in Munich as a symbol of German unity, preparedness to put up a fight and liberation from oppression.

Mit Hermann gegen die Republik

With Hermann against the Republic

The appropriation of the Hermann myth by national ideologists, hostile to democracy and the Republic can be seen from the celebrations around the jubilee of the Hermann Monument in 1925 and the numerous visits by rightwing groups, orientated towards the military. Hermann became the symbolic weapon against all of the so-called "traitors to the Fatherland" and the Hermann Monument was put into the service of their spiritual and material armament. Numerous intellectuals, writers and artists protested against the wide-spread cult of all things

Germanic and the aggressive nationalist worldview of rightwing groupings and nationalist associations.

Der Lippische Wahlkampf 1933

The Election Campaign in Lippe in 1933

In January 1933, during the election campaign in Lippe for the Landtag, the National Socialist German Workers' Party placed enormous emphasis on the Hermann myth. The National Socialists' election success paved Hitler's way to the office of chancellor of the Reich. Afterwards the Hermann Monument was, however, no longer at the centre of political activities and the Hermann myth made way for the superiority of the German race.

Die "Germanische Weltanschauung"

The "Germanic World View"

National Socialism presented itself as the heir to the nationalist tradition. National myths were adopted and re-interpreted with a particular perspective in mind : The Third Reich as the culmination of German history. The nationalist doctrine of race was the focal point of national socialist ideology which proclaimed the biological superiority of a fictitious Nordic race: the Aryans were locked in mortal combat with the likewise constructed race of the Semites (Jews).

The age of the Germanic tribes was regarded at the Golden Age of the Aryans; this was the reason that research into prehistory became a political weapon: the behaviour, the deeds and achievements of Germanic ancestors was to be standard for the age to come. The struggle of the Germanic tribes against Rome became the

struggle of the Nordic race for living space and the right to live and was to justify the National Socialist regime's war of conquest.

Der Mythos lebt weiter...

The Myth Lives on...

After 1945 the myth around Hermann/ Arminius and the Germanic tribes was freed from the militant nationalist ideology of its past and the Hermann Monument became an unpolitical attraction of leisure time tourism. But the myth of the "Varus Battle" lives on: in the old and new Right reverting to past patterns of interpretation of the myth, in the ongoing debate on the correct location for the battle, in the defence of regional identities and an attraction of considerable value in the economics of tourism.

The 2000th anniversary of the Varus Battle has brought with it a upsurge of interest in the subject. The historical context is being spot-lit in numerous books, documentary films and radio plays.

But what road are Arminius and the Germanic tribes now taking? We will have to wait and see whether new levels of meaning open for Germany and Europe after the event "2000 Years Varus Battle" or whether the interest is only part of a brief renaissance.

Anselm Kiefers "Wege der Weltweisheit"

Anselm Kiefer's *Ways of Worldly Wisdom*

In his large-size woodcut collage *Ways of Worldly Wisdom: The Hermann Battle* (1978) Anselm Kiefer shows a portrait of Arminius, framed in a burning wood

and surrounded by a spider's web, with the ghostlike faces of Kleist, Grabbe, Klopstock, Blücher, Clausewitz, Krupp and other great German intellectuals, soldiers and industrialists.

Taking as its basis the myth of the Hermann battle, this "ancestral gallery" embodies the traditions and developments of German history which paved the way to National Socialism. The "world wisdom" which is conjured up here is corrupt, it ended in the National Socialist state's reign of terror, in death and destruction. It shows how thoroughly National Socialism misappropriated German myths, perverted them for its purposes and destroyed them for future generations.

Auf der Suche nach der Varusschlacht

Searching for the Varus Battle

After the discovery of the Annals of Tacitus in the monastery of Corvey near Höxter and the rediscovery of the writings of Velleius Paterculus the first attempts began to localise the place where the Romans had been defeated. Soon the search concentrated on Westphalia. Almost 700 theories as to the location of the battle have been put forward in the course of the centuries. Many of the Roman finds which have been advanced as "proof" are, however, not Roman finds but medieval or modern relicts. The topographical information given by ancient writers, for example saltus Teutoburgiensis (Tacitus), are not compatible with today's place names. To this day no place has been definitively identified as the single right location.

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