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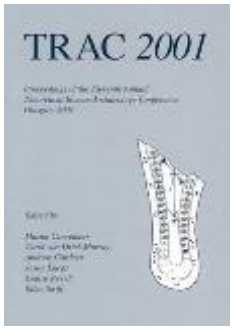

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Measuring Time and Inventing Histories in the Early Empire: Roman and Germanic Perspectives

Maureen Carroll

When Rome's early contacts with exotic and peripheral peoples in northern Europe were established, the way these peoples measured time and what framework existed for their own histories was alien to the Romans. With the intensification of contact, due primarily to the Roman subjugation and consolidation of the peoples of northern Gaul and Germany in the late 1st century BC, a precise chronology of events and movement of population groups was developed which for the first time could be fitted into a global history from the Roman perspective. At the same time, new chapters in the histories of these conquered peoples began which led to the invention of traditions and the construction of new identities directly related to the extension of Roman authority and the need to legitimise new claims to land and power at a particular point in time. This paper focuses on Rome's Germanic neighbours, and later subjects, on either side of the Rhine. It examines the difficulties encountered by Roman historians in measuring time foreign to them, and the means adopted by both the Romans and Germanic peoples after the conquest to make compatible their perceptions of time and history. It also explores the use of the ritual past on the part of Germanic peoples who, through migration and displacement, needed to construct a past which they could represent as their legitimate historical inheritance.

First encounters between Germanic peoples and the Romans are recorded in Roman written sources, and, typically for such texts, historical dates are recorded in the sense of measured time based on actual events and names. Tacitus (*Germania* 37) wrote that Rome was in her 640th year in the consulship of Caecilius Metellus and Papirius Carbo when the Cimbri took up arms, that is in 113 BC. The Cimbri, and their allies the Teutones, made incursions into Gaul, Spain and Italy before they were defeated in 102/101 by the Roman army under Marius in Aquae Sextiae and Vercellae (Figure 1). Tacitus calculated that from 113 "to the second consulship of the emperor Trajan, we get a total of about two hundred and ten years. Such is the time it is taking to conquer Germany" (*Germania* 37). This kind of time calculation is a rational one based on fixed points and years rooted in the Roman calendar.

The Cimbri, called *gens vaga* by Livy (*Periochae Librorum* 63), came from a peninsular area on the outermost limits of 'Gaul' (Strabo *Geography* 7.2.1), in modern scholarship

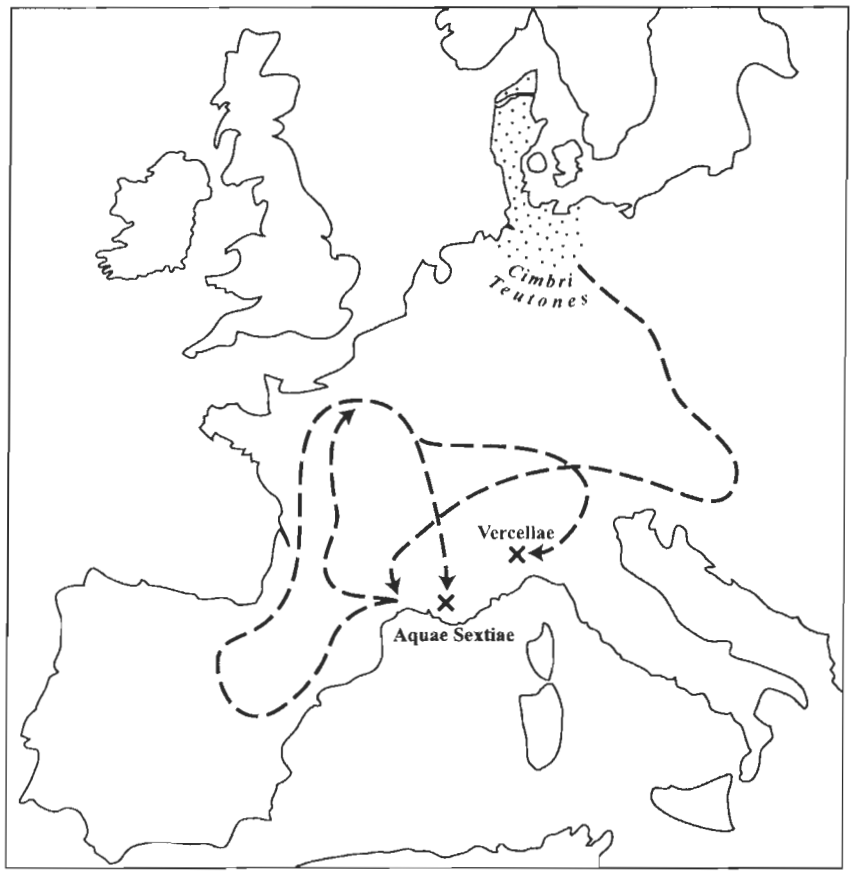

Figure 1. Map of the migrations of the Germanic Cimbri and Teutones between 113 and 102/101 BC (after H. Döbler 2000: 175)

usually thought to be Jutland on the Baltic Sea. They were a confederation of various peoples, the names of only some of which were familiar to the Romans. These include the Cimbri themselves, the Teutones and the Ambrones (Livy *Periochae Librorum* 65, 68). The ethnic origin of the Cimbri was a matter of speculation to the Romans, and it is extremely doubtful whether much was known about any of the other confederates at the time of their migrations. We might assume that some information on their origins and ethnic composition was extracted from the many captives taken to Rome; according to Livy (*Periochae Librorum* 68), 90,000 Teutones and Ambrones and 60,000 Cimbri were taken prisoner, although many of them were probably sold into slavery immediately. Since even a half century later the Cimbri and Teutones were still referred to by Roman historians such as Sallust (*Jugurthine War* 113) as "Gauls", however, there is no evidence to suggest that these prisoners had been interviewed on the topic of their origins, perhaps because after their defeat they were of no further interest to the Romans.

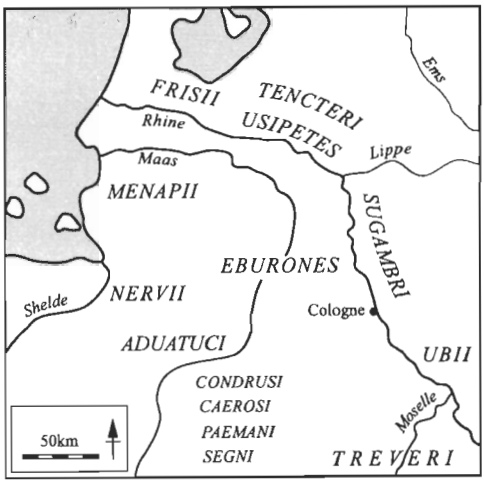

Figure 2. Main tribes known on the Lower Rhine at the time of Caesar (after Carroll 2001: figure 5a)

Only later, through direct contacts between Rome and the peoples of northern Gaul, did the Romans come to identify the Cimbri and Teutones as Germanic (Pohl 2000: 89). Their northernmost migrations also were revealed. The acquisition of this information was due primarily to the preservation of events in the traditions, tales and narratives of the indigenous peoples whom Caesar met (Figure 2). During his campaigns in Gaul, he learned that the Belgae were the only people who had prevented the Cimbri and Teutones from entering their borders in 103 (Caesar, *BG* 2.4), that the Aduatuci were descendants of the Cimbri and Teutones (*BG* 2.29), and that the Tigurini, a sub-group of the Celtic Helvetii in Switzerland, had belonged to the large Cimbric and Teutonic confederation (*BG* 1.12.4).

The history of these preliterate northern peoples was not a recorded one, but it is certain that their origins and movements were preserved in their oral traditions. Tacitus, commenting on the lack of written history in the region, claimed that "traditional songs form the only record of the German past" (*Germania* 2). Not surprisingly, in relaying these unwritten histories, Roman writers resorted to making vague references to ancient traditions, ancestry and descent. No rationally calculated, recorded dates for the events affecting the lives of these peripheral peoples could be transmitted to Roman historians, because they did not exist in the Roman sense of measured time. As Fentress and Wickham have pointed out, the oral tradition of a group may affirm the existence of kings, legends and population movements, but the historian has no way of placing this tradition in perspective (Fentress and Wickham 1992: 77). Roman historians certainly will have had this problem. Germanic and Gallic peoples perhaps measured time in terms of human generations in their genealogies, so that over 50 years later the memory of the Cimbric and Teutonic incursions survived to be relayed to Caesar. Fifty years, that is a period of possibly two generations, is not a long time to remember, but 180 years are. As late as AD 69/70 Roman rhetorical tactics were employed to fuel Gallic animosity towards a Germanic alliance in the same year by reminding the Gauls of the lust, avarice and aggressiveness of Germanic invaders from the distant past (Tacitus *Historiae* 4.73). The reference to this distant past, of necessity, would have to have been understood by the Gauls to be effective.

Although Caesar saw the Rhine as a cultural border between the Gauls to the west and the Germans to the east of it, he also encountered Germanic groups west of the Rhine in northern Gaul. He referred to these as *Germani cisrhenani*, relaying that they once had migrated to the areas in which he found them in the 50s BC (Carroll 2001: 17–20). Without recorded history, the dates for such migrations, if they were not part of the

Cimbric and Teutonic episode, were nebulous, at least to the Romans. Vague references by Strabo and Tacitus to "many years ago", "in former times", "remote antiquity" and "in earlier days" are typical of the attempts of Roman writers to come to grips with time which was not measured in reference to particular, specific events and names familiar to them (Strabo *Geography* 7.2.2; Tacitus *Germania* 2, 28, 41). The *Germani cisrhenani* themselves were almost certainly the source of information on their origins rooted in their own oral histories. The Nervii and the Treveri, for example, claimed to have been of Germanic descent, and the Tungri kept alive the memory of having crossed the Rhine to settle in northern Gaul (Tacitus *Germania* 2, 28). These traditions were transmitted to a Roman audience, but although they finally became embedded in an historical, written context, temporal precision was often lacking. This is exemplified by Tacitus who wrote in 98 AD that the name *Germania* (and he meant the lands east of the Rhine) has only "recently been applied to the country" (*Germania* 2) The vague term "recently" in all likelihood refers to the 1st century BC, but probably not to the period before Caesar's encounters in the region.

After the conquest of Gaul, dates of events and the histories of Gallic and Germanic peoples could be put into a more precise chronological framework, one that was measured in Roman time. A second wave of Germanic migrations from east to west occurred in the last decades of the 1st century BC., and during the reign of Augustus several tribes or sub-groups of tribes were relocated from their old homelands to new ones. Roman written sources tell us this, but also archaeology confirms the establishment of many new settlements at this time which are characterised by a material culture, burial practices and language not indigenous to the west bank of the Rhine before the early Empire (Carroll 2001: 28–32, 79, 117–119). The archaeologically attested Caesarian devastation of tribal territories in northern Gaul and on the lower Rhine and the associated depopulation, even if not absolute, left a gap in the region. In order to stabilise the situation, Germanic groups from regions east of the Rhine were transplanted to the west bank to form a buffer zone against other transrhenine Germanic peoples and thereby ensure the security of the Gallic hinterland (Figure 3). As far as we can tell, these groups sought inclusion in the empire, or at least their leaders did, for one reason or another. Even the transrhenine Sugambri, who had offered fierce resistance to the Romans, appear to have surrendered and been led by influential leaders (*principes*) to the west bank where they were given allotments of land by the Roman government in 8 BC (Heinrichs 2001).

After the Gallic war, the population of northern Gaul found itself in a state of flux. Sub-groups of tribes could disappear, to re-emerge allied with another group, both then appearing under a new name. This could explain Pliny's reference, for example, to the diverse names (*pluribus nominibus*) of the newly attested Texuandri (*Historia Naturalis* 4.106). During this period of upheaval, change and instability, new identities based on the Augustan reorganisation of the region emerged and were forged. The Romans referred to the Augustan tribal groups with specific names, for example the Ubii, Tungri, Cugerni, Cananefates, Batavi and so on, as distinct entities, but in many cases it is difficult, if not impossible, to recognise anything in the material remains of late Iron Age and early Roman tribal groups which is characteristic to one or the other of them. These peoples became historical tribes for the first time when they came into

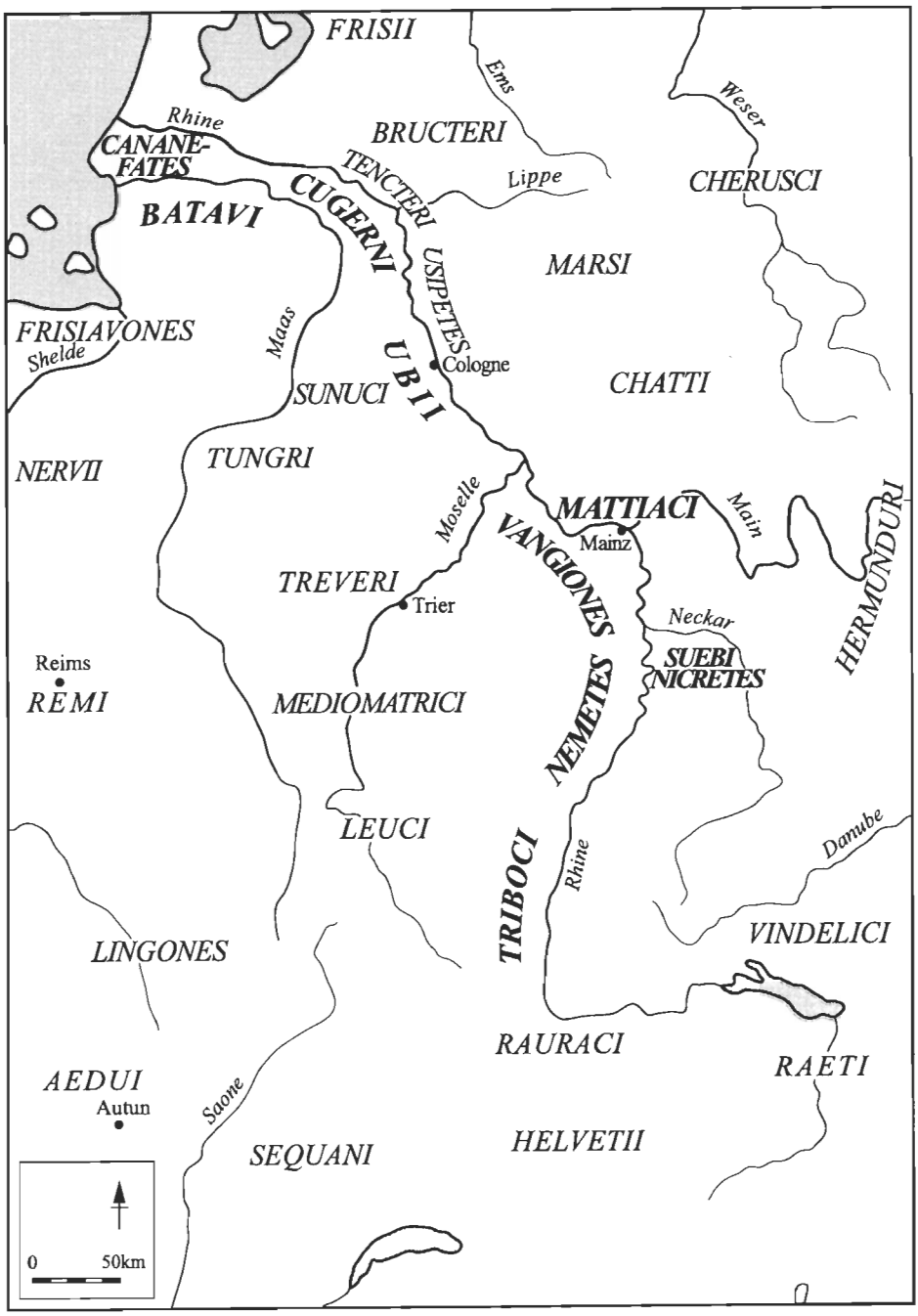

Figure 3. Main tribes on the Rhine at the time of Augustus. Germanic groups originally from regions east of the Rhine are printed in bold (after Carroll 2001: figure 4)

contact with Rome (Carroll 2001: 112–113). Many of them were a mixture of various, probably unnamed, peoples and clans who were given the name of the dominant or favoured group by the Romans. This is directly related to the stock-taking and reorganisation of the newly acquired regions and their inhabitants by means of a census to fit human and economic resources into a Roman administrative framework (Nicolet 1991: 123–139). The Romans clearly played a role in the construction and consolidation of tribal groups, and the Roman state-driven establishment of discrete tribal territories as *civitates* with definite boundaries further contributed to group identities. In funerary monuments of the 1st century AD, it is these tribal affiliations that are utilised by these groups and by the Germanic bodyguard in Rome in their commemorative epitaphs (Bellen 1981; Carroll 2001: 113, plate 21).

Once integrated into the Roman world, how were the histories of these peoples conveyed and how was time measured, by themselves and by the Romans? We can examine one of them briefly to explore this. The Ubii as an east-bank Germanic group first appear by name in Caesar's accounts of the Gallic war (*BG* 4.3, 4.8, 16). According to him, they were under constant threat by the much stronger Suebi and were forced to pay tribute to them. After the Ubii had concluded treaties of protection and mutual assistance with Caesar, they migrated of their own accord or were intentionally transplanted by Roman agency in the last decades of the 1st century BC to the west bank of the Rhine (Tacitus *Germania* 28). Whether or not they actually were transferred under the "protection" of Agrippa himself to their new homelands (Strabo *Geography* 4.3.4, Tacitus *Annales* 12.27) is uncertain. This may be an 'invented tradition', invented both by the Ubii to legitimise their claims on the new lands and by the Romans to glorify their role in the subjugation, but also the subsequent protection, of conquered peoples on the periphery of the Roman world (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983). At any rate, the migration is connected to a specific Roman name and event, namely to Agrippa and his governorship. Around the turn of the millennium, an urban capital at Cologne, the *oppidum Ubiorum*, was founded *de novo* by the Romans as the central *civitas* focus, and it was promoted to a veteran colony by Claudius in AD 50 (Carroll 2001: 123–131). This took place at the behest of Agrippina, granddaughter of Agrippa, the 'protector' of the original Ubian settlers, bringing the 'Agrippan connection' full circle, and relating the event to Roman history and time.

By the end of the first century AD there is no longer any mention of Ubii or the tribal affiliation *natione Ubius*. By the time of the Batavian revolt in 69/70 the inhabitants of Cologne referred to themselves as Agrippinenses after the name of the colony (*Colonia Claudia Ara Agrippineses*). According to Tacitus (*Historiae* 4.28, 4.64), the other Germanic groups on the lower Rhine resented the Ubii for having adopted the name of Agrippinenses and having renounced their Germanic origins. Because of the rhetoric employed by Tacitus, we cannot be sure that this sentiment really was expressed by opposing Germanic peoples but the inscriptional sources do confirm that this name had become common for citizens of Cologne of Ubian extraction.

If the other Germanic groups really did use the argument of common Germanic heritage to appeal to the Ubii, these remarks clearly would indicate the recollection of Ubian origin after 120 years, that is about four generations from the time of their transrhenine migrations. There could be no-one alive who knew the original homelands

and had experienced the act of leaving them, suggesting that there were generational acts of transfer of this knowledge and a continuation of oral histories, on both sides of the Rhine. It is not Germanic identity, however, that appears foremost in the sentiments of the Ubii in the capital. Now known as the Agrippinenses, they appear to have constructed a new *origo* story based on that point in time in which the colony was settled by Roman veterans with whom they intermarried. This new identity is directly related to this specific, Roman event, and it was defined in relation to the temporal and physical juxtaposition of the other groups within the region.

The migration to the west meant a profound break with the old, yet the new beginning had to be experienced in part in relation to older traditions and a prior context. Not everything the Ubii did was tied to the Roman sense of time and history. The persistence of the Ubian language, for example, indicates that this tradition was being passed on to subsequent generations (Weisgerber 1968: 396, 415–16; Alföldy 1968: 80). The language of the indigenous population, the *Germani cisrhenani*, also continued to be spoken throughout the Roman period, although it is significantly more recognisable in the countryside (Alföldy 1967: 8; Rüger 1981: 288, No. 1). Other traditions such as the retention of Ubian ethnic costume also persisted well into the 3rd century in the colony and the *civitas* territory, although it appears that it is only the women through whom this was passed on (Carroll 2001: 119, figures 51–52).

Although the Ubian origin myth was intimately related to the appearance of the Romans in northern Gaul and to specific dates in the Roman calendar, the Ubii needed a past measured in a different form of time, ritual time, which justified their position to other Germanic groups present in the area. For this reason, links with the remote past were constructed by the Ubii to establish the antiquity and strengthen the legitimacy of the new social order, a phenomenon recognised in other contexts and time periods (Bradley 1987). The use of the ritual past can be seen in the early development of ancestor cults and sanctuaries for them, primarily in rural and village areas, but also in the colony. An excellent example of this is the cult of the Matronae or ancestral mothers which had its roots in a pre-Roman ancestor cult operating at a local level (Derks 1998: 119–130). The native names of the Matronae are often related to names of local communities, population groups and clans, and kinship groups within this cult organisation are recognisable (Carroll 2001: 117–119). Based on linguistic studies of the epithets of the Matronae, the cult was maintained both by the Ubii and the indigenous *Germani cisrhenani*. Ancestors, both maternal and paternal, are witnessed in votive dedications to the Matronae west of Cologne. Some of these local Matronae were the ancestral goddesses of the founding member of particular clans.

In performing acts of patronage such as the investment in sanctuaries and votive dedications, various groups were utilising ritual time to imply a continuity with the past. At a time of great change and insecurity in the 1st century AD, this would have been an ideologically stablising factor. Not only the construction of monuments, but also the invention of a tradition of historical continuity can be seen when a society is being transformed rapidly (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983: 4). As interlopers in the region, the Ubii must have regarded ancestry and associations with the divine as crucial, particularly because they had not moved into an empty landscape, but into one which was still inhabited by other population groups with much older claims on the land. That ancestry

could establish the supremacy of one group over another is exemplified in the case of the Semnones, the core group of the Suebi, whose noble ancestry and divine descent was confirmed by religious observance (Tacitus *Germania* 39).

The utilisation of the ritual past is also apparent as a device in the territory of the Batavi on the lower Rhine. This sub-group of the east-bank Chatti settled in the Rhine delta in a landscape already inhabited by other peoples sometime between 51 and 13 BC, almost certainly as part of Roman frontier policy (Roymans 1999; Roymans 2001: 93–95). This relocated group may have been rather small, perhaps just an elite leader or king with his retinue or clan. The newcomers, like the Ubii, were allies of Rome, and their arrival on the lower Rhine is directly or indirectly related to Roman intervention in the area. One way of asserting their status and power in the region appears to have been the conscious re-use of religious sites. A major rural sanctuary to Hercules Magusanus, the tutelary god of the Batavi, was established in the early 1st century AD at Empel at the confluence of the Maas and the Dieze rivers (Roymans and Derks 1994). Archaeological evidence indicates that this site was in use already in the 1st century BC, not by the Batavi, but by other population groups who were later displaced by the Gallic war. Gold coins of the Eburones and Nervii found at Empel suggest that they were using the cult site before the arrival of the Batavi. The Batavian elite erected an impressive monumental temple on the site, thereby constructing a link between their own distant past and the antiquity and ritual importance of the site. Another major cult place established by the Batavi is that at Kessel at the confluence of the Maas and Waal rivers. The metalwork found there, particularly the fibulae, indicate that the site was in use in the La Tène D1 phase, thus clearly pre-dating the Caesarian conquest and the Batavian occupation of the region (Roymans, pers. com.). Finally, although the sequence of occupation is poorly understood, it has been suggested that a pre-Roman cult place on the Waal river was incorporated into the Batavian capital at Nijmegen/ *Oppidum Batavorum* (Van Enckevort and Thijssen 2001: 88–91). The designation of such sites or buildings at Empel, Kessel and Nijmegen as places of special historic interest for the group may have constructed a past which Batavian society referred to as its history or historical inheritance (Radley 1990). This link with the ritual past would have given legitimacy to the Batavian claims on the land which, from this point on, became the ancestral homelands of future generations of Batavi.

The knowledge of origin and descent, transmitted for generations, was an essential part of the social memory and life history of the population groups in Germany and northern Gaul that is not recorded in written histories prior to the Roman conquest. The inability on the part of Roman historians to come to terms with an alien past measured in a non-Roman way is apparent in the attempts to 'record' pre-Roman history in ethnographic accounts of the region. After the Roman subjugation and annexation of northern Gaul and Germany the history of the region could be fitted within a precise chronological framework. A specific sequence of events in the later 1st century BC, the Roman reorganisation and transplantation of Germanic groups beyond the eastern frontier to the western Empire, resulted in the construction of new identities on the frontier. At the same time, new *origo* stories were constructed and traditions invented by incoming Germanic groups and their Roman conquerors which relate directly to Roman political events, known historical figures and dates fixed in the

Roman calendar. Germanic groups became 'historical' groups and their histories 'began' with their integration in the Roman empire. Nevertheless, Germanic language, dress traditions and ancestry are some of the shared essentials that continued to give these displaced peoples stability in the region. The construction of a ritual past further contributed to the establishment and sorely needed legitimisation of the new population groups who had to deal not only with the removal from their eastern homelands, but also with remnants of possibly antagonistic indigenous peoples in the west who had much older claims to the land.

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