

## Lucus horridus. Emotional responses to 'northern' holy groves in Lucan and Tacitus

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### Lucan 3.399-449

Lucus erat longo numquam violatus ab evo,  
obscurum cingens connexis aera ramis,  
et aelidas alte submotis solibus umbras.  
Hunc non ruricolae Panes, nemorumque potentes  
Silvani Nymphaeae tenent, sed barbara ritu  
sacra deum, structae diris altaribus arae;  
omnisque humanis lustrata cruoribus arbor.  
Si qua fidem meruit superos mirata vetustas,  
illis et volucres metuunt insistere ramis,  
et lustris recubare ferae: nec ventus in illas  
incubuit silvas, excussaque nubibus atris  
fulgura: non ullis frondem praebentibus auris  
arboribus suos horror inest. Tum plurima nigris  
fontibus unda cadit, simulacraque moesta deorum  
arte carent, caesisque extant informia truncis.  
Ipse situs putrique facit iam robore pallor  
attonitos: non vulgatis sacrata figuris  
numina sic metuunt: tantum terroribus addit,  
quos timeant non nosse deos. Iam fama ferebat  
saepe cavas motu terrae mugire cavernas,  
et procumbentes iterum consurgere taxos,  
et non ardentis fulgere incendia silvae,  
roboraque amplexos circumfluxisse dracones.  
Non illum cultu populi propiore frequentant,  
sed cessere deis. Medio cum Phoebus in axe est,  
aut coelum nox atra tenet, pavet ipse sacerdos  
accessus, dominumque timet deprendere luci.  
Hanc iubet immisso silvam procumbere ferro:  
nam vicina operi belloque intacta priore  
inter nudatos stabat densissima montes.  
Sed fortes tremuere manus, motique verenda  
maiestate loci, si robora sacra ferirent,

in sua credebant redituras membra secures.  
Implicitas magno Caesar torpore cohortes  
ut vidit, primus raptam librare bipennem  
ausus, et aeriam ferro proscindere quercum,  
effatur, merso violata in robora ferro:  
iam ne quis vestrum dubitet subvertere silvam,  
credite me fecisse nefas. Tunc paruit omnis  
imperii non sublato securo pavore  
turba, sed expensa superiorum et Caesaris ira.  
Procumbunt orni, nodosa impellitur ilex,  
silvaeque Dodones, et fluctibus aptior alnus,  
et non plebeios luctus testata cupressus,  
tum primum posuere comas, et fronde carentes  
admisere diem: propulsaque robore denso  
sustinuit se silva cadens. Gemuere videntes  
Gallorum populi: muris sed clausa iuventus  
exsultat. Quis enim laesos impune putaret  
esse deos? Servat multos fortuna nocentes:  
et tantum miseris irasci numina possunt.

"There stood a grove  
which from the earliest time no hand of man  
had dared to violate; hidden from the sun  
its chill recesses; matted boughs entwined  
prisoned the air within. No sylvan nymphs  
here found a home, nor Pan, but savage rites  
and barbarous worship, altars horrible  
on massive stones upreared; sacred with blood  
of men was every tree. If faith be given  
to ancient myth, no fowl has ever dared  
to rest upon those branches, and no beast  
has made his lair beneath: no tempest falls,  
nor lightnings flash upon it from the cloud.  
stagnant the air, unmoving, yet the leaves  
filled with mysterious trembling; dripped the streams  
from coal-black fountains; effigies of gods  
rude, scarcely fashioned from some fallen trunk  
held the mid space: and, pallid with decay,  
their rotting shapes struck terror. Thus do men  
dread most the god unknown. 'Twas said that caves

rumbled with earthquakes, that the prostrate yew rose up again; that fiery tongues of flame gleamed in the forest depths, yet were the trees unkindled; and that snakes in frequent folds were coiled around the trunks. Men flee the spot nor dare to worship near: and e'en the priest or when bright Phoebus holds the height, or when dark night controls the heavens, in anxious dread draws near the grove and fears to find its lord. Spared in the former war, still dense it rose where all the hills were bare, and Caesar now its fall commanded. But the brawny arms which swayed the axes trembled, and the men, awed by the sacred grove's dark majesty, held back the blow they thought would be returned. This Caesar saw, and swift within his grasp uprose a ponderous axe, which downward fell

**Tacitus, Germ. 39**

Vetustissimos nobilissimosque Sueborum Semnones memorant; fides antiquitatis religione firmatur. stato tempore in silvam auguriis patrum et prisca formidine sacram nominis eiusdemque sanguinis populi legationibus coeunt caesoque publice homine celebrant barbari ritus horrenda primordia. est et alia luco reverentia: nemo nisi vinculo ligatus ingreditur, ut minor et potestatem numinis prae se ferens. si forte prolapsus est, attolli et insurgere haud licitum: per humum evolvuntur. eoque omnis superstitio respicit, tamquam inde initia gentis, ibi regnator omnium deus, cetera subiecta atque parentia.

“The Semnones give themselves out to be the most ancient and renowned branch of the Suevi. Their antiquity is strongly attested by their religion. At a stated period, all the tribes of the same race assemble by their representatives in a grove consecrated by the auguries of their forefathers, and by immemorial associations of terror. Here, having publicly slaughtered a human victim, they celebrate the horrible beginning of their barbarous rite. Reverence also in other ways is paid to the grove. No one enters it except bound with a chain, as an inferior acknowledging the might of the local divinity. If he chance to fall, it is not lawful for him to be lifted up, or to rise to his feet; he must crawl out along the ground. All this superstition implies the belief that from this spot the nation took its origin, that here dwells the supreme and all-ruling deity, to whom all else is subject and obedient.” (transl. A. J. Church & W. J. Brodribb)

**Tacitus, Ann. 1.61**

praemisso Caecina ut occulta saltuum scrutaretur pontesque et aggeres umido paludum et fallacibus campis inponeret, incedunt maestos locos visuque ac memoria deformis. [...] adiacebant fragmina telorum equorumque artus, simul truncis arborum antefixa ora. Lucis propinquis barbarae arae, apud quas tribunos ac primorum ordinum centuriones mactaverant. (Ann. 1.61)

“Sending Caecina forward to explore the secret forest passes and to throw bridges and causeways over the flooded marshes and treacherous levels, they pursued their march over the dismal tract, hideous to sight and memory. [...] Hard by lay splintered spears and limbs of horses, while human skulls were nailed prominently on the tree-trunks. In the neighbouring groves stood the savage altars at which they had slaughtered the tribunes and chief centurions.” (transl. J. Jackson)

**Tacitus, Ann. 14.30**

Stabat pro litore diversa acies, densa armis virisque, intercurantibus feminis, [quae] in modum Furiarum veste ferali, crinibus disiectis faces praeferebant; Druidaeque circum, preces diras sublatis ad caelum manibus fundentes, novitate adspectus perculere militem, ut quasi haerentibus membris immobile corpus vulneribus praeberent. dein cohortationibus ducis et se ipsi stimulantes, ne muliebre et

*fanaticum agmen pavescerent, inferunt signa sternuntque obvios et igni suo involvunt. praesidium posthac impositum victis excisique luci saevis superstitionibus sacri: nam cruore captivo adolere aras et hominum fibris consulere deos fas habebant.*

“On the beach stood the adverse array, a serried mass of arms and men, with women flitting between the ranks. In the style of Furies, in robes of deathly black and with dishevelled hair, they brandished their torches; while a circle of Druids, lifting their hands to heaven and showering imprecations, struck the troops with such an awe at the extraordinary spectacle that, as though their limbs were paralysed, they exposed their bodies to wounds without an attempt at movement. Then, reassured by their general, and inciting each other never to flinch before a band of females and fanatics, they charged behind the standards, cut down all who met them, and enveloped the enemy in his own flames. The next step was to install a garrison among the conquered population, and to demolish the groves consecrated to their savage cults: for they considered it a duty to consult their deities by means of human entrails.” (transl. J. Jackson)

### Seneca Ep. 4.41.3

*si tibi occurrerit vetustis arboribus et solitum altitudinem egressis frequens lucus et conspectum caeli ramorum aliorum alios protegentium summovens obtentu, illa proceritas silvae et secretum loci et admiratio umbrae in aperto tam densae atque continuae fidem tibi numinis faciet.*

“If ever you have come upon a grove that is full of ancient trees which have grown to an unusual height, shutting out a view of the sky by a veil of pleached and intertwining branches, then the loftiness of the forest, the seclusion of the spot, and your marvel at the thick unbroken shade in the midst of the open spaces, will prove to you the presence of deity.” (transl. R. M. Gummere)

### Mela, De situ orbis 3.17

*Terra est frumenti praecipue ac pabuli ferax et amoena lucis immanibus.*

“The land [of Gaul] is rich, primarily in grain and fodder, and it is lovely with its vast woods.” (transl. F. E. Romer)

### Mela, De situ orbis 3.18-9

*Gentes superbae supersitiosae aliquando etiam immanes adeo, ut hominem optimam et gratissimam diis victimam crederent. Manent vestigia feritatis iam abolitae, atque ut ab ultimis caedibus temperant, ita nihilominus, ubi devotos altaribus admovere, delibant. Habent tamen et facundiam suam magistrosque sapientiae druidas. Hi terrae mundique magnitudinem et formam, motus caeli ac siderum et quid dii velint scire profitentur. Docent multa nobilissimos gentis clam et diu, vicenis annis, aut in specu aut in abditis saltibus.*

“The peoples are crude, superstitious and sometimes even so monstrous that they used to believe that to the gods the best and most pleasing sacrificial victim was a human being. Traces of their savagery remain, even though it has been banned now. Nevertheless, after they have led their consecrated human victims to the altars, they still graze them slightly, although they do hold back from the ultimate bloodshed. And yet, they have both their own eloquence and their own teachers of wisdom, the Druids. These men claim to know the size and shape of the earth and of the universe, the movements of the sky and of the stars, and what the gods intend. In secret, and for a long time (twenty years), they teach many things to the noblest males among their people, and they do it in a cave or in a hidden mountain defile.” (transl. F. E. Romer)

Samuel Charters Macpherson, 'An Account of the Religious Opinions and Observances of the Khonds of Goomsur and Boad', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* 7, 172-38.

"[...] with respect to the superstition of the Khonds it is necessary to keep distinctively in view, that their low stage of intellectual advancement presents a peculiar and additional source of error." (175)

"[...] kept sacred from the axe, and is avoided by the Khond as haunted ground. My followers were always warned to abstain from seeking shelter within its awful shade." (182)

"And in some parts of Goomsur where this practice prevails, small rude images of beasts and birds in clay are made in great numbers at this festival, and stuck on poles; a practice of the origin or meaning of which I have been able to obtain no satisfactory explanation." (183)

"The priest [...] now takes the branch of a green tree, which is cleft to a distance of several feet down the centre. They insert the victim within the rift, fitting it in some districts to his chest, in others to his throat." (183)

"[...] The rite is discharged with feelings almost purely religious [as opposed to the sacrifice of war prisoners, as in Mexico], in fearful obedience to the express mandate of the terrible power whose wrath it is believed to place in abeyance." (198)

"Participation in the public worship and contribution to the charges of its ceremonial are, as has been observed, the first conditions of association in a tribe [...] And the bond of a common altar and a distinctive worship is seen to survive the blended ties which rise from community of institutions, of manners, of traditions, and of language. [...] the hill tribes, who have maintained their usages pure, endeavour, by conveying a share of the victims to the fields of important individuals or families [...] who may incline to exchange their ancestral faith for that of the more civilized people, to make them involuntary partakers in the sacrifices, and to retain them within the ancient bond of social communion." (198)

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