

The Famed Forest of the Past: Beatus Rhenanus, *Libri tres institutionum rerum Germanicarum* (1531)

Abstract

In the early sixteenth century, the humanist Beatus Rhenanus (1485–1547) composed his multi-volume work on German institutions and customs. The excerpt below focusses on the famed Hercynian Forest (the ancient collective name for the low mountain ranges north of the Danube and east of the Rhine), which was well-known at least as far back as antiquity, earning mention in Caesar's *Commentarii de bello Gallico* [*Commentaries on the Gallic War*] and other classical texts. The importance of forests for demarcating “Germania” and its peoples is particularly evident in this excerpt.

Source

An exposition and correction of Caesar's passage on the Hercynian Forest, where it is usually read that this woodland starts on the border of the Nemetes and the Rauraci.

Gaius Julius Caesar, speaking in Book 6 of his *Commentaries on the Gallic War*, says that “It begins at the frontiers of the Helvetii, Nemetes, and Rauraci, and extends in a right line along the river Danube to the territories of the Daci and the Anartes.” But what are these Nemetes doing here, who nowadays are understood by everyone, and quite rightly, to be in the area of Speyer? [...] Trust me, reader, this passage of Caesar is in no small need of correction.

[...]

Now, it can be appreciated that in Caesar's time the Hercynian Forest extended as far as the Venetus lake [Lake Constance], that is, before the limit of such extension was determined by Alemannia and Upper Rhetia, where we now see the citadel of Tujelia and Gregia. These two are undoubtedly Roman fortifications near Juliomagus [Schleitheim]—which I assume is incorrectly referred to as Pfullendorf—and Brigobanne [Hüfingen], going down towards the source of the Danube. Well now, it was these places that the Romans took care to wipe out as a part of the forest was razed.

Little Notes, or Little Commentary

The whole text from Caesar's is given as book 6, chapter 24, and it goes like this: “The extent of this Hercynian Forest discussed above is measured in travel days, nine days travelling fast; there is no other way of measuring it, since they are ignorant of road distance measures. It begins at the borders of the Helvetii, the Nemetes, and the Rauraci, and it reaches in a straight line along the river Danube, down to the borders of the Daci and the Anartes. It then verges to the left, away from the river, and it touches the lands of many peoples due to its great extension. In this part of Germania there is no one who even after a journey of sixty days would say he has heard of or been at the origin of this forest, nor anyone who would vouch for its place of origin.”

It is evident from the preceding words from what great antiquity and how widely the Forest extended over this part of Germania, how broad and vast it was, and how it was celebrated by the greatest authorities: and yet, where

is it? Did it disappear, buried with all its remains? In our days it is certainly narrower, and it surrounds Bohemia proper. The neighboring mountains are called Hercynian after it, the same mountains that go by the name of Sudetes. Baudrandus reckons that its starting point is on the borders of Gaul and the Ardennes, and it reaches through all of Germania, spreading branches and antlers, as it were, which happen to have a variety of names, and which according to regional and local circumstances obtain the diverse appellations they now have. This is why we include unhesitatingly among them the *Desert of the Helvetes*, the Gabreta Forest [Bohemian Forest], the Sudetes, the Semana Forest [Thuringian Forest], and mounts Abnobus [Danube] and Melibocus [Odenwald]. This forest actually cuts right through Germania down to the Riphean Mountains and the Maeotian Swamps, somehow like the Taurus runs through Asia, the Atlas through Mauritania, and the Apennines through Italia.

Willich affirms in his *Commentary* (p. 561ff.) that the Germanic peoples, however, do not limit themselves to calling the Forest by one single name, and so: in Breisgau, near Freiburg, it is called **Schwarzwald**, that is, the Black Forest, because of how the pines block the light; near Heidelberg it is called **Odenwald**, or in Germanic fashion **Otthenwald**, that is, Othonia, after Emperor Otto, who used to hunt around the area; between Würzburg and Bamberg it is called **Steigerwald**, that is Royal, for the Forest is all upland there and a craggy terrain; by the confluence of the Lohr and the Main it is called **Westerwald**, that is, the Western Forest; near Mainz, Frankfurt and Asberg it is called **Spessart**, that is, Woodpecker Forest, because of the abundance of woodpeckers, for the Germani call the woodpecker **Specht**. In Thuringia, near the confines of Franconia and Vogtland, it is called **Thüringerwald**; in the Mansfeld County, approaching Saxony, it is called **Auf der Hardt**; in Bohemia, **Böhmerwald** (see Ferrarius, and also Willich p. 447f., 561ff.; Pirckheimer, in the treatise mentioned, p. 703). “This Forest then is like the Taurus through Asia, or the Atlas through Africa, as it extends throughout Europe from the edges of the Ardennes Forest—in Gaul, as mentioned earlier—a place that still to this day enjoys with its name the claim to be the starting point; thereafter it goes through Germania and Sarmatia, right to the apex of Europe, to high up eternal ridges by heavenly summits, where it spreads in oaks created with the world itself.” Then “pouring down through Swabia, reaching wide towards the sources of the Danube and the Neckar, it gives rise to the Black Forest (which is also called Bacenis by our elders). And just as it went in ancient times through a hundred villages, nowadays it runs through a hundred not despicable Swabian towns, until it reaches the city of Eichstädt (so called after the oak woodlands) and the banks of the Altmühl. Following these for some while until the vicinity of the Danube’s gorges, it then parts from them, and through the Nurembergian sands and the Danubian Noricum it keeps company to the Hercynian summit, a lofty and timeless ridge which is Germania’s highest point. From there, I mean from the pine-covered mountain which descends into the four famous and rich streams, the Forest pours down in the space of nearly two thousand paces, full of the wonder and majesty of nature.

And so, from that mountain which generates streams and woodlands, it shoots forth into the various parts of the world four branches in the manner of four huge antlers,” as have been described by Conrad Celtis in his *Additions on the Hercynian Forest*, where he mentions these things *passim*, summing up finally: “Given such an inventory of the Forest, then, its length is indeed given by the limits of Europe, as it should be declared from the river Meuse in Gaul to the Don, even to the sources; in breadth it extends from the Alps through to the North Sea (a number of miles which can be ascertained, if someone wants to investigate the matter more carefully, by calculating the latitude and the degrees). Within this area, I mean the northernmost reaches, the forest embraces within its woodlands three most noble peoples, the Swabians, the Franks, and the Baemi, who differ nonetheless in their mores, language, and religion.” Now, it is known that Germania does also possess other forests, but these other are dedicated to fulfill needs and have utilitarian purposes, limited to firewood, and to products for manufacture and trade. [...]

Source of original Latin text: Beatus Rhenanus, “Expositus & emendatus apd Caesarem locus de ortu sylvae Hercyniae, ubi vulgo legitur, oriri id nemus a Nemetum & Tauracorum finibus,” in *Libri tres institutionum rerum Germanicarum nov-antiquarum, historico-geographicarum*. Ulmae: Georg Wilhelm Kühn, 1693, pp. 409–12. Available online at: <https://onb.digital/result/10B73986>

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