

### **Ancient Communists: The Celtiberian Vaccae**

In 1884, Fredrick Engels published *Der Ursprung der Familie, des Privateigentums und des Staats* (*The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*), a work that reflected on the American anthropologist Lewis H. Morgan's 1877 book *Ancient Society: Or Researches in the Lines of Human Progress from Savagery through Barbarism to Civilization*. Using the notes that his recently deceased colleague Karl Marx had made on Lewis' work, Engels posited that the "barbarism" phase of our development towards a state-based civilization had been characterized by a form of early communism (which he called "gentile constitution"). Engels was particularly influenced by Morgan's description of the gens structure of the Iroquois (Haudenosaunee) Confederacy of North America:

And a wonderful constitution it is, this gentile constitution, in all its childlike simplicity! No soldiers, no gendarmes or police, no nobles, kings, regents, prefects, or judges, no prisons, no lawsuits –and everything takes its orderly course. All quarrels and disputes are settled by the whole of the community affected, by the gens or the tribe, or by the gentes among themselves; only as an extreme and exceptional measure is blood revenge threatened –and our capital punishment is nothing but blood revenge in a civilized form, with all the advantages and drawbacks of civilization. Although there were many more matters to be settled in common than today –the household is maintained by a number of families in common, and is communistic, the land belongs to the tribe, only the small gardens are allotted provisionally to the households –yet there is no need for even a trace of our complicated administrative apparatus with all its ramifications. The decisions are taken by those concerned, and in most cases everything has been already settled by the custom of centuries. There cannot be any poor or needy –the communal household and the gens know their responsibilities towards the old, the sick, and those disabled in war. All are equal and free – the women included. There is no place yet for slaves, nor, as a rule, for the subjugation of other tribes.  
—*The Origin of the Family*, Chapter III. The Iroquois Gens. Alick West translation.

While Engels also saw primitive communism in other—to him—contemporary primitive "matriarchal" societies, such as those in the Philippines and Indonesia, he focused, not surprisingly, on the "gentile constitution" of the ancient "German barbarians":

In return for liberating the Romans from their own state, the German barbarians took from them two-thirds of all the land and divided it among themselves. The division was made according to the gentile constitution. The conquerors being

relatively few in number, large tracts of land were left undivided, as the property partly of the whole people, partly of the individual tribes and gentes. Within each gens the arable and meadow land was distributed by lot in equal portions among the individual households.

—*The Origin of the Family*, Chapter VIII. The Formation of the State among Germans. Alick West translation.

The Marx-Engels concept of primitive communism has engendered a substantial body of scholarship. Today, most scholars are in agreement that Paleolithic and Mesolithic bands of hunter-gatherers were egalitarian, but the degree to which private (as opposed to personal) property arose in later Neolithic, pastoral societies is a matter of dispute.

Both Marx and Engels were accomplished Classicists. (Karl Marx wrote his doctoral dissertation on the ancient philosophers Democritus and Epicurus.) In his *Origin of the Family*, Engels included chapters on the rise of private property in ancient Athens and Rome, and in his discussion of the “German barbarians” Engels cites Tacitus, Caesar, Livy, Pliny, and Diodorus Siculus as sources.

It is curious, then, that, as far as I know (and I am no expert on the subject), neither Marx nor Engels ever mentioned a passage in Diodorus Siculus’ *Library of History* (Βιβλιοθήκη Ἱστορικὴ) that most clearly demonstrates their concept of primitive communism. (I came across this passage as I was researching what ancient Greek and Latin authors had to say about Iberia.)

The 1<sup>st</sup>-century BCE historian Diodorus Siculus wrote in Greek but his *Library of History* was directed to a Latin-speaking Roman audience. In Book V of his work, Diodorus Siculus presents an extensive geographical and ethnological account of the Iberian peninsula, which had recently come under Roman control. In this section, Diodorus Siculus mentions the Vaccaei tribe, which he locates in the central Duero valley of the Meseta of northern Hispania:

Of the tribes neighbouring upon the Celtiberians the most advanced is the people of the Vaccaei, as they are called; for this people each year divides among its members the land which it tills and making the fruits the property of all they measure out his portion to each man, and for any cultivators who have appropriated some part for themselves they have set the penalty as death.

—*Library of History*, Book V, 34. C.H. Oldfather translation.

It is also curious—again, as far as I know—that in the highly politicized modern history of Spain, no mention was ever made of this earliest attested communist society.