

# The Barbarian World

## 4. TACITUS

### GERMANIA

In 98 the Roman historian Cornelius Tacitus (ca. 56–ca. 120) wrote a brief description of the Germanic peoples living beyond the Rhine. The *Germania* was his second work, written after the *Life of Agricola* (a biography and tribute to his father-in-law and the elaboration of his life as a model for Roman senatorial behavior) but in the years before his two major historical works, the *Historiae* and *Annales*. His account is based on the writings of previous geographers and historians, especially Pliny the Elder's lost *German Wars*, as well as on interviews with people who had first-hand experience with the Germanic peoples. Although largely accurate in its details, the treatise organizes and filters Tacitus's data

through the classical ethnological categories. Its purpose was less to inform Romans about the Germans than to criticize Roman customs and morals by contrasting them with those of the barbarians.

Source: Tacitus, *Dialogus, Agricola, Germania* (London: Heineman, 1914).  
*Germania* trans. Maurice Hutton, rev. D. LePan, 1989.  
Further Reading: Ronald H. Martin, *Tacitus* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981).

1 Undivided Germany is separated from the Gauls, Rhaetians, and Pannonians by the rivers Rhine and Danube: from the Sarmatians and Dacians by mutual fear or mountains: the rest of it is surrounded by the ocean, which enfolds wide peninsulas and islands of vast expanse, some of whose people and kings have but recently become known to us: war has lifted the curtain.

The Rhine, rising from the inaccessible and precipitous crest of the Rhaetian Alps, after turning west for a reach of some length is lost in the North Sea. The Danube pours from the sloping and not very lofty ridge of Mount Abnoba, and visits several peoples on

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2 As for the Germans themselves, I should

suppose them to be native to the area and only very slightly blended with new arrivals from other races or regions; for in ancient times people who sought to migrate reached their destination by sea and not by land; while, in the second place, the great ocean on the further side of Germany—at the opposite end of the world, so to speak, from us—is rarely visited by ships from our world. Besides, even apart from the perils of an awful and unknown sea, who would have left Asia or Africa or Italy to look for Germany? With its wild scenery and harsh climate it is pleasant neither to live in nor look upon unless it be one's home.

Their ancient hymns—the only record of history which they possess—celebrate a god Tuisto, a scion of the soil, and his son Mannus as the founders of their race. To Mannus they ascribe three sons, from whose names the tribes of the seashore came to be known as Ingaevones, the central tribes as Herminones, and the rest as Istaevones. Some authorities, using the license which pertains to antiquity, claim more sons for the god and a larger number of race names: Marsi, Gambriui, Suebi, Vandilii. These are, they say, real and ancient names, while the name of “Germany” is new. The first tribes in fact to cross the Rhine and expel the Gauls, though now called Tungri, were then

styled Germans: so little by little the name—a tribal, not a national, name—prevailed, until the whole people were called by the artificial name of “Germans,” first only by the victorious tribe in order to intimidate the Gauls, but afterwards among themselves also.

3 The authorities also record how Hercules appeared among the Germans, and on the eve of battle the natives chant “Hercules, the first of brave men.” They use as well another chant—“barritus” is the name they use for it—to inspire courage; and they forecast the results of the coming battle from the sound of the cry. Intimidation or timidity depends on the concert of the warriors; the chant seems to them to mean not so much unison of voices as union of hearts; the object they specially seek is a certain volume of hoarseness, a crashing roar, their shields being brought up to their lips, that the voice may swell to a fuller and deeper note by means of the echo.

To return. Ulysses also—in the opinion of some authorities—was carried during his long and legendary wanderings into this ocean, and reached the lands of Germany. Asciburgium, which stands on the banks of the Rhine and has inhabitants today, was founded, they say, and named by him; further, they say that an altar dedicated by Ulysses, who added to his own

inscription that of his father Laertes, was once found at the same place, and that certain monuments and barrows, marked with Greek letters, are still extant on the borderland between Germany and Rhaetia. I have no intention of furnishing evidence to establish or refute these assertions: every one according to his temperament may minimize or magnify their credibility.

4 Personally, I agree with those who hold that in the peoples of Germany there has been given to the world a nation untainted by intermarriage with other peoples, a peculiar people and pure, like no one but themselves; whence it comes that their physique, in spite of their vast numbers, is identical: fierce blue eyes, red hair, tall frames. They are powerful too, but only spasmodically; they have no fondness for feats of endurance or for hard work. Nor are they well able to bear thirst and heat; to cold and hunger, thanks to the climate and the soil, they are accustomed.

5 There are some varieties in the appearance of the country, but in general it is a land of bristling forests and unhealthy marshes; the rainfall is heavier on the side of Gaul; the winds are higher on the side of Noricum and Pannonia.

It is fertile in cereals, but unkind to fruit-bearing

trees; it is rich in flocks and herds, but for the most part they are undersized. Even the cattle lack natural beauty and majestic brows. The pride of the people is rather in the number of their beasts, which constitute the only form of wealth they value.

The gods have denied them gold and silver, whether in mercy or in wrath I find it hard to say. Not that I would assert that Germany has no veins bearing gold or silver, for who has explored there? At any rate, they are not affected, like their neighbors, by the use and possession of such things. One may see among them silver vases, given as gifts to their commanders and chieftains, but treated as of no more value than earthenware. Although the border tribes for purposes of trade treat gold and silver as precious metals, and recognize and collect certain coins of our money, the tribes of the interior practice barter in the simpler and older fashion. The coinage which appeals to them is the old and long-familiar: the denarii with milled edges, showing the two-horsed chariot. They prefer silver to gold: not that they have any feeling in the matter, but because a number of silver pieces is easier to use for people whose purchases consist of cheap objects of general utility.

6 Even iron is not plentiful among them, as may

be gathered from the style of their weapons. Few have swords or the longer kind of lance: they carry short spears, in their language "*frameae*," with a narrow and small iron head, so sharp and so handy in use that they fight with the same weapon, as circumstances demand, both at close quarters and at a distance. The mounted man is content with a shield and *framea*: the infantry launch showers of spears as well, each man a volley, and are able to hurl these great distances, for they wear no outer clothing, or at most a light cloak.

Their garb is for the most part quite plain; only shields are decorated, each a few colors. Few have breast-plates: scarcely one or two at most have metal or hide helmets. The horses are conspicuous for neither beauty nor speed; but then neither are they trained like our horses to run in shifting circles: the Germans ride them forwards only or to the right, with but one turn from the straight, dressing the line so closely as they wheel that no one is left behind. In general there is more strength in their infantry, and accordingly cavalry and infantry fight in one body; the swift-footed infantryman, whom they pick out of the whole body of warriors and place in front of the line, are well-adapted to cavalry battles. The number of these men is fixed—one hundred from each canton,





and among themselves "the Hundred" is the precise name they use. What was once a number only has become a title and a distinction. The battle-line itself is arranged in wedges. To retire, provided you press on again, they treat as a question of tactics, not of cowardice; they carry off their dead and wounded even in drawn battles. To have abandoned one's shield is the height of disgrace. The man so dishonored cannot be present at religious rites, nor attend a council; many survivors of war have ended their infamy with a noose.

7 They choose their kings on the grounds of birth, their generals on the basis of courage. The authority of their kings is not unlimited or arbitrary; their generals control them by example rather than command, the troops admiring their energy and the conspicuous place they take in front of the line. But anything beyond this—capital punishment, imprisonment, even a blow—is permitted only to the priests, and then not as a penalty or under the general's orders, but in obedience to the god whom they believe accompanies them on campaign. Certain totems, in fact, and emblems are fetched from groves and carried into battle. The strongest incentive to courage lies in this, that neither chance nor casual grouping makes the

squadron or the wedge, but family and kinship. Close at hand, too, are their dearest, so that they hear the wailing voices of women and cries of children. Here are the witnesses who are in each man's eyes most precious; here the praise he covets most. The warriors take their wounds to mother and wife, who do not shrink from counting the hurts and demanding a sight of them: they give to the combatants food and encouragement.

8 Tradition relates that some battles that seemed lost have been restored by the women, by their incessant prayers and by the baring of their breasts; for so it is brought home to the men that slavery, which they dread much more keenly on their women's account, is close at hand. It follows that the loyalty of those tribes is more effectively guaranteed if you hold, among other hostages, girls of noble birth.

Further, they conceive that in women is a certain uncanny and prophetic sense: they neither scorn to consult them nor slight their answers. In the reign of Vespasian of happy memory we saw Velaeda treated as a deity by many during a long period; but in ancient times they also revered Albruna and many other women—in no spirit of flattery, nor for the manufacture of goddesses.



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9 Of the gods they most worship Mercury, to whom on certain days they count even the sacrifice of human life lawful. Hercules and Mars they appease

with such animal life as is permissible. A section of the Suebi sacrifices also to Isis:<sup>1</sup> the cause and origin of this foreign worship I have not succeeded in discovering, except that the emblem itself, which takes the shape of a Liburnian galley, shows that the ritual is imported.

Apart from this they deem it incompatible with the majesty of the heavenly host to confine the gods within walls, or to mold them into any likeness of the human face. They consecrate groves and thickets, and they give divine names to that mysterious presence which is visible only to the eyes of faith.

10 To divination and casting lots they pay as much attention as any one. The method of drawing lots is uniform. A bough is cut from a nut-bearing tree and divided into slips. These are distinguished by certain runes and spread casually and at random over white cloth. Afterwards, should the inquiry be official the priest of the state, if private the father of the family in person, after prayers to the gods and with eyes turned to heaven takes up one slip at a time till he has done this on three separate occasions. After taking the three he interprets them according to the runes which have already been stamped on them. If the message is a prohibition, no inquiry on the same matter is made

during the same day; if the message gives permission, further confirmation is required by means of divination. Among the Germans divination by consultation of the cries and flight of birds is well known. Another form of divination peculiar to them is to seek the omens and warnings furnished by horses.

In the same groves and thickets are fed certain white horses, never soiled by mortal use. These are yoked to a sacred chariot and accompanied by the priest and king, or other chief of the state, who then observe their neighing and snorting. On no other form of divination is more reliance placed, not merely by the people but also by their leaders. The priests they regard as the servants of the gods, but the horses are their confidants.

They have another method of taking divinations, by means of which they probe the issue of serious wars. A member of the tribe at war with them is somehow or other captured and pitted against a selected champion of their own countrymen, each in his tribal armor. The victory of one or the other is taken as a presage.

11 On small matters the chiefs consult, on larger questions the community; but with this limitation: even when the decision rests with the people, the

matter is considered first by the chiefs. They meet, unless there is some unforeseen and sudden emergency, on days set apart—when the moon is either new or full. They regard these times as the most auspicious for the transaction of business. They count not days as we do, but by nights and their decisions and proclamations are subject to this principle; the night, that is, seems to take precedence over the day.

It is a foible of their freedom that they do not meet at once and when commanded, but waste two or three days by dilatoriness in assembling. When they are finally ready to begin, they take their seats carrying arms. Silence is called for by the priests, who then have the power to force obedience. Then a king or a chief is listened to, in order of age, birth, glory in war, or eloquence. Such figures command attention through the prestige which belongs to their counsel rather than any prescriptive right to command. If the advice tendered is displeasing, the people reject it with groans; if it pleases them, they clash their spears. The most complimentary expression of assent is this martial approbation.

12 At this assembly it is also permissible to lay accusations and to bring capital charges. The nature of the death penalty differs according to the offense:



traitors and deserters are hung from trees; cowards, poor fighters, and notorious evil-livers are plunged in the mud of marshes with a hurdle on their heads. These differences of punishment follow the principle that crime should be blazoned abroad by its retribution, but shameful actions hidden. Lighter offenses have also a measured punishment. Those convicted are fined a certain number of horses or cattle. Part of the fine goes to the king or the state; part is paid to the person who has brought the charge or to his relatives. At the same gatherings are selected chiefs, who administer law through the cantons and villages: each of them has one hundred assessors from the people to act as his responsible advisors.

13 They do no business, public or private, without arms in their hands; yet the custom is that no one takes arms until the state has endorsed this competence. Then in the assembly itself one of the chiefs or his father or his relatives equip the young man with shield and spear. This corresponds with them to the toga, and is youth's first public distinction; before that he was merely a member of the household, now he becomes a member of the state. Conspicuously high birth, or great services on the part of their ancestors may win the chieftain's approval even for the

very young men. They mingle with the others, men of maturer strength and tested by long years and have no shame to be seen among the chief's retinue. In the retinue itself degrees are observed at the chief's discretion; there is great rivalry among the retainers to decide who shall have the first place with the chief, and among the chieftains as to who shall have the largest and most enthusiastic retinue. It is considered desirable to be surrounded always with a large band of chosen youths—glory in peace, in war protection. Nor is this only so with a chief's own people; with neighboring states also it means name and fame for a man that his retinue be conspicuous for number and character. Such men are in demand for embassies, and are honored with gifts; often, by the mere terror of their name, they are able to break the back of opposition in war.

14 When the battlefield is reached it is a reproach for a chief to be surpassed in prowess and a reproach for his retinue not to equal the prowess of its chief. Much worse, though, is to have left the field and survived one's chief; this means lifelong infamy and shame. To protect and defend the chief and to devote one's own feats to his glorification is the gist of their allegiance. The chief fights for victory, but the



retainers for the chief.

Should it happen that the community where they are born has been drugged with long years of peace and quiet, many of the high-born youth voluntarily seek those tribes which are at the time engaged in some war; for rest is unwelcome to the race, and they distinguish themselves more readily in the midst of uncertainties: besides, you cannot keep up a great retinue except by war and violence. It is the generous chief that the warriors expect to give them a particular war-horse or murderous and masterful spear. Banquetings and a certain rude but lavish outfit take the place of salary. The material for this generosity comes through war and foray. You will not so readily persuade a German to plow the land and wait for the year's returns as to challenge the enemy and earn wounds. Besides, it seems limp and slack to get with the sweating of your brow what you can gain with the shedding of your blood.

15 When they are not warring, they spend much time hunting, but more in idleness—creatures who eat and sleep, the best and bravest warriors doing nothing, having handed over the charge of their home, hearth and estate to the women and the old men and the weakest members of the family. For themselves they

vegetate by that curious incongruity of temperament which makes of the same men such lovers of slumber and such haters of quiet.

It is the custom in their states for each man to bestow upon the chief unasked some portion of his cattle or crops. It is accepted as a compliment, but also serves the chief's needs. The chiefs appreciate still more the gifts of neighboring tribes, which are sent not merely by individuals but by the community—selected horses, heavy armor, bosses and bracelets; by this time we have taught them to accept money also.

16 It is well known that none of the German tribes live in cities, that individually they do not permit houses to touch each other. They live separated and scattered, according as spring-water, meadow, or grove appeals to each man. They lay out their villages not, after our fashion, with buildings contiguous and connected; everyone keeps a clear space round his house, whether it be a precaution against the chances of fire or just ignorance of building. They have not even learned to use quarry-stone or tiles: the timber they use for all purposes is unshaped, and stops short of all ornament or attraction. Certain buildings are smeared with a stucco bright and glittering enough to be a substitute for paint and frescoes. They are in the



habit also of opening pits in the earth and piling dung in quantities on the roof, as a refuge from the winter or a root-house, because such places lessen the harshness of frost. If an enemy comes, he lays waste the open, but the hidden and buried houses are either missed outright or escape detection just because they require a search.

17 For clothing all wear a cloak, fastened with a clasp, or, in its absence a thorn. They spend whole days on the hearth round the fire with no other covering. The richest men are distinguished by the wearing of underclothes—not loose, like those of Parthians and Sarmatians, but drawn tight, throwing each limb into relief.

They wear also the skins of wild beasts: the tribes adjoining the river-bank in casual fashion, the inland tribes with more attention, since they cannot depend on traders for clothing. The beasts for this purpose are selected, and the hides so taken are checkered with the pieb skins of the creatures native to the outer ocean and its unknown waters.

The women have the same dress as the men, except that very often long linen garments, striped with purple, are in use for the women. The upper part of this costume does not widen into sleeves; their arms

and shoulders are therefore bare, as is the adjoining portion of the breast.

18 None the less the marriage tie with them is strict; you will find nothing in their character to praise more highly. They are almost the only barbarians who are content with a wife apiece. The very few exceptions have nothing to do with passion, but consist of those with whom polygamous marriage is eagerly sought for the sake of their high birth.

As for the dowry, it is not the wife who brings it to the husband, but the husband to the wife. The parents and relations are present to approve these gifts—gifts not devised for ministering to female fads, nor for the adornment of the person of the bride, but oxen, a horse and bridle, a shield and spear or sword. It is to share these things that the wife is taken by the husband, and she in turn brings some piece of armor to her husband. Here is the gist of the bond between them, here in their eyes its mysterious sacrament, the divinity which hedges it. Thus the wife may not imagine herself released from the practice of heroism, released from the chances of war; she is warned by the very rites with which her marriage begins that she comes to share with her husband hard work and peril. Her fate will be the same as his in peace and in panic,



her risks the same. This is the moral of the yoked oxen, of the bridled horse, of the exchange of arms; so she must live and so she must die. The things she takes she is to hand over inviolate to her children, fit to be taken by her daughters-in-law and passed on again to her grandchildren.

19 So their life is one of fenced-in chastity. There is no arena with its seductions, no dinner-tables with their provocations to corrupt them. Of the exchange of secret letters men and women alike are innocent. Adultery is very rare among these people. Punishment is prompt and is the husband's prerogative: the wife's hair is close-cropped, she is stripped of her clothes, her husband drives her from his house in the presence of his relatives and pursues her with blows through the length of the village. For lost chastity there is no pardon; neither beauty nor youth nor wealth will find the sinner a husband. No one laughs at vice there; no one calls seduction the spirit of the age. Better still are those tribes where only maids marry and where a woman makes an end, once and for all, with the hopes and vows of a wife. So they take one husband only, just as one body and one life, in order that there may be no second thoughts, no belated fancies, and in order that their excessive desire may be not for the man, but for

marriage. To limit the number of their children or to put to death any of the later children is considered abominable. Good habits have more force with them than good laws elsewhere.

20 The children in every house grow up amid nakedness and squalor into that girth of limb and frame which is to our people a marvel. Its own mother suckles each at her breast; children are not passed on to nursemaids and wet-nurses.

Nor can master be recognized from servant by having been spoiled in his upbringing. Master and servant live in the company of the same cattle and on the same mud floor till years separate the free-born and character claims her own.

The virginity of young men is long preserved, and their powers are therefore inexhaustible. Nor for the girls is there any hothouse forcing; they pass their youth in the same way as the boys. Their stature is as tall; when they reach the same strength they are mated, and the children reproduce the vigor of the parents. Sisters' children mean as much to their uncle as to their father: some tribes regard this blood-tie as even closer and more sacred than that between son and father, and in taking hostages make it the basis of their demand, as though they thus secure loyalty more





surely and have a wider hold on the family.

However, so far as succession is concerned, each man's children are his heirs, and there is no will. If there are no children, the nearest degrees of relationship for the holding of property are brothers, paternal uncles, and maternal uncles. The more relations a man has and the larger the number of his connections by marriage, the more influence has he in his age; it does not pay to have no ties.

21 It is incumbent to take up the feuds of one's father or kinsman no less than his friendships. But such feuds do not continue unappeasable; even homicide may be atoned for by a fixed number of cattle and sheep. The whole family thereby receives satisfaction to the public advantage, for feuds are more dangerous among a free people.

No race indulges more lavishly in hospitality and entertainment. To close the door against any human being is a crime. Everyone according to his means welcomes guests generously. Should there not be enough, he who is your host goes with you next door, without an invitation, but it makes no difference; you are received with the same courtesy. Stranger or acquaintance, no one distinguishes them where the right of hospitality is concerned. It is customary to

speed the parting guest with anything he fancies. There is the same readiness in turn to ask of him: gifts are the Germans' delight, but they neither count upon what they have given, nor are bound by what they have received.

22 On waking from sleep, which they generally prolong in the day, they wash, usually in warm water, since winter bulks so large in their lives. After washing they take a meal, seated apart, each at his own table. Then, arms in hand, they proceed to business, or, just as often, to revelry. To drink heavily day and night is a reproach to no man. Brawls are frequent, as you would expect among heavy drinkers: these seldom terminate with abuse, more often in wounds and bloodshed. Nevertheless the mutual reconciliation of enemies, the forming of family alliances, the appointment of chiefs, the question even of war or peace, are usually debated at these banquets; as though at no other time were the mind more open to obvious, or better warmed to larger, thoughts. The people are without craft or cunning, and expose in the freedom of revelry the heart's secrets; so every mind is bared to nakedness. On the next day the matter is handled afresh. So the principle of each debating season is justified: deliberation comes when people are incapable of



pretense, but decision when they are secure from illusion.

23 For drink they use a liquid distilled from barley or wheat, after fermentation has given it a certain resemblance to wine. The tribes nearest the river also buy wine. Their diet is simple: wild fruit, fresh venison, curdled milk. They banish hunger without sauce or ceremony, but there is not the same temperance in facing thirst: if you humor their drunkenness by supplying as much as they crave, they will be vanquished through their vices as easily as on the battlefield.

24 Their shows are all of one kind, and the same whatever the gathering may be: naked youths, for whom this is a form of professional acting, jump and bound between swords and upturned spears. Practice has made them dexterous and graceful. Yet they do not perform for hire or gain: however daring be the sport, the spectator's pleasure is the only price they ask.

Gambling, one may be surprised to find, they practise in all seriousness in their sober hours, with such recklessness in winning or losing that, when all else has failed, they stake personal liberty on the last and final throw.

The loser faces voluntary slavery; though he may

be the younger and the stronger man, he will still allow himself to be bound and sold. Such is the Germans' persistence in wrongdoing, or their good faith, as they themselves style it. Slaves so acquired they trade, in order to deliver themselves as well as the slave from the humiliation involved in such victory.

25 Their other slaves are not organized in our fashion: that is, by a division of the services of life among them. Each of them remains master of his own house and home: the master requires from the slave as serf a certain quantity of grain or cattle or clothing. The slave so far is subservient; but the other services of the household are discharged by the master's wife and children. To beat a slave or coerce him with hard labor and imprisonment is rare. If slaves are killed, it is not usually to preserve strict discipline, but in a fit of fury like an enemy, except that there is no penalty to be paid.

Freedmen are not much above slaves. Rarely are they of any weight in the household, never in politics, except in those states which have kings. Then they climb above the free-born and above the nobles; in other states the disabilities of the freedman are the evidence of freedom.

26 To charge interest, let alone interest at high



rates, is unknown and the principle of avoiding usury is accordingly better observed than if there had been actual prohibition.

Land is taken up by a village as a whole, in quantity according to the number of cultivators. They then distribute it among themselves on the basis of rank, such distribution being made easy by the amount of land available. They change the arable land yearly, and there is still land to spare, for they do not strain the fertility and resources of the soil by tasking them, through the planting of vineyards, the setting apart of water-meadows, or the irrigation of vegetable gardens. Grain is the only harvest required of the land. Accordingly the year itself is not divided into as many parts as with us: winter, spring, summer have a meaning and a name; the gifts of autumn and its name are alike unknown.

27 In burial there is no ostentation. The only ceremony is to burn the bodies of their notables with special kinds of wood. They build a pyre, but do not load it with palls or spices. The man's armor and some of his horse also is added to the fire. The tomb is a mound of turf: the difficult and tedious tribute of a monument they reject as too heavy on the dead. Weeping and wailing they put away quickly; sorrow

and sadness linger. Lamentation becomes women: men must restrain their emotion.

So much in general we have ascertained concerning the origin of the undivided Germans and their customs. I shall now set forth the habits and customs of the several nations, and the extent to which they differ from each other; and explain what tribes have migrated from Germany to the Gallic provinces.

28 That the fortunes of Gaul were once higher than those of Germany is recorded on the supreme authority of Julius of happy memory. Therefore it is easy to believe that the Gauls at one time crossed over into Germany; small chance there was of the river preventing each tribe, as it became powerful, from seizing new land, which had not yet been divided into powerful kingdoms. Accordingly the country between the Hercynian forest and the rivers Rhine and Moenus was occupied by the Helvetii, and the country beyond by the Boii, both Gallic races. The name Boihaemum still testifies to the old traditions of the place, though here has been a change of occupants.

Whether, however, the Aravisci migrated into Pannonia from the Osi, or the Osi into Germany from the Aravisci, must remain uncertain, since their speech, habits, and type of character are still the same.



Originally, in fact, there was the same misery and the same freedom on either bank of the river, the same advantages and the same drawbacks.

The Treveri and Nervi conversely go out of their way in their ambition to claim a German origin, as though this illustrious ancestry delivers them from any affinity with the indolent Gaul.

On the river bank itself are planted certain peoples who are unquestionably German: Vangiones, Triboci, Nemetes. Not even the Ubii, though they have earned the right to be a Roman colony and prefer to be called "Agrippinenses" after the name of their founder, blush to own their German origin. They originally came from beyond the river. After they had given proof of their loyalty, they were placed in charge of the bank itself, in order to block the way to others, not in order to be under supervision.

29 Of all these races the most manly are the Batavi, who occupy only a short stretch of the river bank, but with it the island in the stream. They were once a tribe of the Chatti, and on account of a rising at home they crossed the river onto lands which later became part of the Roman Empire. Their distinction persists and the emblem of their ancient alliance with us; they are not insulted, that is, by the exaction of

tribute, and there is no tax-farmer to oppress them. Immune from burdens and contributions, and set apart for fighting purposes only, they are reserved for war to be, as it were, our arms and weapons. Equally loyal are the tribe of the Mattiaci; for the greatness of the Roman nation has projected the awe felt for our empire beyond the Rhine, and beyond the long-established frontier. So by site and territory they belong to their own bank, but by sentiment and thought they act with us, and are similar in all respects to the Batavi, except that hitherto both the soil and the climate of their land make them more lively.

I should not count among the people of Germany, though they have established themselves beyond the Rhine and Danube, the tribes who cultivate "the tithe-lands." All the wastrels of Gaul, plucking courage from misery, took possession of that disputed land. Later, since the frontier line has been drawn and the garrisons pushed forward, these lands have been counted as an outlying corner of the empire and a part of the Roman province.

30 Beyond these people are the Chatti. The front of their settlements begins with the Hercynian forest. The land is not so low and marshy as the other states of the level German plain; yet even where the hills





cover a considerable territory they gradually fade away, and so the Hercynian forest, after escorting its Chatti to the full length of their settlement, drops them in the plain. This tribe has hardier bodies than the others, close-knit limbs, a forbidding expression, and more strength of the intellect. There is much method in what they do, for Germans at least, and much shrewdness. They elect magistrates and listen to the man elected; know their place in the ranks and recognize opportunities; reserve their attack; have a time for everything; entrench at night; distrust luck, but rely on courage; and—the rarest thing of all, and usually attained only through Roman discipline—depend on the initiative of the general rather than on that of the soldier. Their whole strength lies in their infantry, whom they load with iron tools and baggage, in addition to their arms. Other Germans may be seen going to battle, but the Chatti go to war. Forays and casual fighting are rare with them. The latter method no doubt is part of the strength of cavalry—to win suddenly, that is, and as suddenly to retire. For the speed of cavalry is near allied to panic, but the deliberate action of infantry is more likely to be resolute.

31 One ceremony that is practised by other

German peoples only occasionally, depending on preference, has with the Chatti become a convention: to let the hair and beard grow when a youth has attained manhood, and to remove this manly facial garb only after an enemy has been slain. Standing above the bloody spoil, they dismantle their faces again, and advertise that then and not before have they paid the price of their birthpangs, and are worthy of their kin and country. Cowards and weaklings remain unkempt. The bravest also wear a ring of iron—the badge of shame on other occasions among this people—as a symbolic band from which each man frees himself by the slaughter of an enemy. This symbolism is very popular, and men already growing gray still wear this uniform for the pointing finger of friend and foe. Every battle begins with these men: the front rank is made up of them and is a curious sight. But, even in peace they do not allow a tamer life to enervate them. None of them has a house or land or any business. Wherever they go they are entertained; they waste the possessions of others and are indifferent to their own, until age and loss of blood make them unequal to such demanding heroism.

32 Next to the Chatti come the Usipi and Tencteri, on the Rhine banks where the river has ceased to shift



its bed and has become fit to serve as a boundary. The Tencteri, in addition to the general reputation as the race of warriors, excel in the accomplishments of trained horsemen. Even the fame of the Chatten infantry is not greater than that of their cavalry. Their ancestors established the precedent, and succeeding generations vie with them. Horsemanship is the diversion of children, the center of competition for youth, and the abiding interest of age. Horses descend with servants, house, and regular inheritance. The heir to the horse, however, is not as in other things the eldest son but the confident soldier and the better man.

33 Next to the Tencteri one originally came across the Bructeri. The Chamavi and Angrivarii are said to have trekked there recently, after the Bructeri had been expelled or cut to pieces by the joint action of neighboring peoples. Whether this was from disgust at their arrogance or from the attractions of plunder, or because Heaven leans to the side of Rome cannot be said. But Heaven did not grudge us a dramatic battle; over sixty thousand men fell, not before the arms and spears of Rome, but—what was even a greater triumph for us—merely to delight our eyes. Long may such behavior last, I pray, and persist among the German

nations—if they feel no love for us, at least may they feel hatred for each other. Now that the destinies of the empire have passed their zenith, Fortune can guarantee us nothing better than discord among our foes.

34 The Angrivarii and Chamavi are surrounded to the south by the Dulgubnii and the Chasuarii and other tribes not so well known to history. To the north follow the Frisii: they are called the Greater or Lesser Frisii according to the measure of their strength. These two tribes border the Rhine down to the ocean, and also fringe the great lakes which the fleets of Rome navigate. In that quarter we have even reached the ocean itself, and beyond our range are rumored to stand the pillars of Hercules. Did Hercules really visit those shores, or is it only that we have agreed to credit all marvels everywhere to him? Nor did Drusus Germanicus lack audacity as an explorer but Ocean vetoed inquiry into either itself or Hercules. Soon the attempt was abandoned, and it came to be judged more reverent to believe in the works of deities than to comprehend them.

35 Thus far we have been enquiring into Western Germany. At this point the country falls away with a great bend towards the north. First in this area come



the Chauci. Though they start next to the Frisii and occupy part of the seaboard, they also border on all of the tribes just mentioned, and finally edge away south as far as the Chatti. This vast block of territory is not merely held by the Chauci but filled by them. They are the noblest of the German tribes, and prefer to protect their vast domain by justice alone. They are neither grasping nor lawless; in peaceful seclusion they provoke no wars and despatch no raiders on marauding forays. The special proof of their great strength is, indeed, just this, that they do not depend for their superior position on injustice. Yet they are ready with arms, and, if circumstances should require, with armies, men and horse in abundance. So, even though they keep the peace, their reputation does not suffer.

36 Bordering the Chauci and the Chatti are the Cherusci. For long years they have been unassailed and have encouraged an abnormal and languid peacefulness. It has been a pleasant rather than a sound policy. With lawlessness and strength on either side of you, you will find no true peace; where might is right, self-control and righteousness are titles reserved for the stronger. Accordingly, the Cherusci, who were once styled just and generous, are now described as

indolent and shortsighted, while the good luck of the victorious Chatti has been credited to them as wisdom. The fall of the Cherusci dragged down the Fosi also, a neighboring tribe. They share the adversity of the Cherusci on even terms, though they have only been dependents in their prosperity.

37 This same "sleeve" or peninsula of Germany is the home of the Cimbri, who dwell nearest the ocean. They are a small state today, but rich in memories. Broad traces of their ancient fame are still extant—a spacious camp on each bank (of the Rhine), by the circuit of which you can even today measure the size and skill of the nation and get some sense of that mighty trek.

Our city was in its six hundred and fortieth year when the Cimbrian armies were first heard of, in the consulship of Caecilius Metellus and Papirius Carbo. If we count from that date to the second consulship of the Emperor Trajan, the total amounts to about two hundred and ten years. For that length of time the conquest of Germany has been in process. Between the beginning and end of that long period there have been many mutual losses. Neither Samnite nor Carthaginian, neither Spain nor Gaul, nor even the Parthians have taught us more lessons. The German



fighting for liberty has been a keener enemy than the absolutism of Arsaces. What has the East to taunt us with, apart from the overthrow of Crassus—the East which itself fell at the feet of a Ventidius and lost Pacorus?

But the Germans routed or captured Carbo and Cassius and Aurelius Scaurus and Servilius Caepio and Gnaeus Mallius, and wrested five consular armies in one campaign from the people of Rome, and even from a Caesar wrested Varus and three legions with him. Nor was it without paying the price that Marius smote them in Italy, and Julius of happy memory in Gaul, and Drusus, Nero, and Germanicus in their own homes. Soon after that the great tragedy threatened by Gaius Caesar turned into a farce. Then came peace until, on the opportunity offered by our own dissensions and by civil war, the Germans carried the legions' winter quarters by storm and even aspired to the Gallic provinces. Finally they were repulsed, and they have in recent years gratified us with more triumphs than victories.

38 Now I must speak of the Suebi, who do not comprise only one tribe, as with the Chatti and the Tencteri. Rather they occupy the greater part of Germany, and are still distinguished by special

national names, though styled in general Suebi. One mark of the race is to comb the hair back over the side of the face and tie it low in a knot behind. This distinguishes the Suebi from other Germans, and the free-born of the Suebi from the slave. In other tribes, whether from some relationship to the Suebi or, as often happens, from imitation, the same thing may be found, but it is rare and confined to the period of youth. Among the Suebi, even till the hair is gray they twist the rough locks backward, and often knot them on the very crown. The chieftains wear theirs somewhat more ornamentally, and are to this extent interested in appearances, but innocently so. It is not for making love or being made love to, but rather that men who are to face battle are—in the eyes of their foes—more terrifying with these adornments heightening their stature.

39 The Semnones are described as the most ancient and best-born tribe of the Suebi; this is confirmed by religious rite. At fixed seasons all the tribes of the same blood gather with their delegations at a certain forest that is hallowed by visions beheld by their ancestors and by the awe of the ages. After publicly offering up a human life, they celebrate the grim "initiation" of their barbarous worship. There is a





further tribute which they pay to the grove; no one enters it until he has been bound with a chain. He puts off his freedom, and advertises in his person the might of the deity. If he chanced to fall, he must not be lifted up or rise—he must writhe along the ground until he is out again. The whole superstition comes to this, that it was here where the race arose, here where dwells the god who is lord of all things; everything else is subject to him. The prosperity of the Semnones enforces the idea; they occupy one hundred cantons, and their magnitude leads them to consider themselves the head of the Suebi.

40 The Langobardi, conversely, are distinguished by lack of number. Set in the midst of numberless and powerful tribes, they find safety not in submissiveness, but in peril and pitched battle. Then come the Reudigni and the Aviones, and the Angli and the Varini, the Eudoses and Suardones and Nuithones. These tribes are protected by forests and rivers. There is nothing noteworthy about them individually, except that they worship in common Nerthus, or Mother Earth, and conceive her as intervening in human affairs, and riding in procession through the cities of men. In an island of the ocean is a holy grove, and in it a consecrated chariot, covered with robes. A single

priest is permitted to touch it; he interprets the presence of the goddess in her shrine, and follows with deep reverence as she rides away, drawn by cows. Then come days of rejoicing, and all places keep holiday, as many as she thinks worthy to receive and entertain her. They make no war, take no arms. Every weapon is put away; peace and quiet rules until the same priest returns the goddess to her temple, when she has had her fill of the society of mortals. After this the chariot and the robes, and, if you are willing to credit it, the deity in person, are washed in a sequestered lake. Slaves perform this duty and are then straightaway swallowed by the same lake. Hence a mysterious terror and ignorance full of piety as to what it may be which men only behold to die.

41 These sections on the Suebi extend into the more secluded parts of Germany. Nearer to us—to follow the course of the Danube, as before I followed the Rhine—comes the state of the Hermunduri. They are loyal to Rome, and with them alone among Germans business is transacted not on the river bank, but far within the frontier in the most thriving colony of the province of Rhaetia. They cross the river everywhere without supervision, and while we let other peoples see only our fortified camps, to them we



have thrown open our houses and homes because they do not covet them. Among the Hermunduri rises the River Albis—a river once famous, now a name only.

42 Next to the Hermunduri are the Naristi and then the Marcomani and the Quadi. The fame and strength of the Marcomani are outstanding; their very home was won by their bravery, through the expulsion in ancient times of the Boii. Nor are the Naristi and Quadi inferior to them. These tribes are, so to speak, the brow of Germany, so far as Germany is wretched by the Danube. The Marcomani and the Quadi retained kings of their own race down to our time—the noble houses of Maroboduus and Tudrus. Now they submit to foreign kings also, but the force and power of their kings rest on the influence of Rome. Occasionally they are assisted by our armed intervention: more often by subsidies, out of which they get as much help.

43 Behind them are the Marsigni, Cotini, Osi, and Buri, enclosing the Marcomani and Quadi from the rear. Among these the Marsigni and Buri in language and culture recall the Suebi. As for the Cotini and Osi, the Gallic tongue of the first and the Pannonian of the second prove not to be Germans; so does their submission to tribute. This tribute is imposed upon

them as foreigners in part by the Sarmatae, in part by the Quadi. The Cotini, to their shame, even have iron-mines to work. All these peoples have little level land, but occupy the summits and ridges of mountains. In fact, a continuous range parts and cuts Suebia in two.

Beyond the range are many races. The most widely diffused name is that of the Luggii, which extends over several states. It will be sufficient to have named the strongest: Harii, Helvecones, Manimi, Elisii, Nahanarvali. Among the Nahanarvali one is shown a grove, the seat of a prehistoric ritual. A priest presides in female dress; but according to the Roman interpretation the gods recorded in this fashion are Castor and Pollux. That at least is the spirit of the godhead here recognized, whose name is the Alci. No images are in use; there is no sign of foreign superstition. Nevertheless they worship these deities as brothers and as youths.

But to return. The Harii, apart from the strength in which they surpass the peoples just enumerated, are fierce in nature, and augment this natural ferocity by the help of art and season. They blacken their shields and dye their bodies; they choose pitchy nights for their battles; by sheer panic and darkness they strike terror like an army of ghosts. No enemy can face this



of keeping with the lethargy customary to Germans. They ransack the sea also, and are the only people who gather in the shallows and on the shore itself amber, which they call in their tongue "glaesum."

Nor have they, being barbarians, inquired or learned what substance or process produces it. It lay there long among the rest of the flotsam and jetsam of the sea, until Roman luxury gave it a name. To the natives it is useless. It is gathered crude and is forwarded to Rome unshaped; the barbarians are astonished to be paid for it. Yet you may infer that it is the gum of trees; certain creeping and even winged creatures are continually found embedded in it. They have been entangled in its liquid form, and, as the material hardens, are imprisoned. I should suppose therefore that just as in the secluded places in the East, where frankincense and balsam are exuded, so in the islands and lands of the West there are groves and glades more than ordinarily luxuriant. These are tapped and liquefied by the rays of the sun as it approached, and ooze into the nearest sea, whence by the force of tempests they are stranded on the shores opposite. If you try the qualities of amber by setting fire to it, it kindles like a torch, feeds an oily and odororous flame, and soon dissolves into something like

pitch and resin.

Adjacent to the Suiones come the tribes of the Sitones, resembling them in all other respects, and differing only in this, that among them the woman rules. To this extent they have fallen lower not merely than freemen but even than slaves.

46 Here Suebia ends. As for the tribes of the Peucini, Venedi, and Fenni, I am in doubt whether to count them as Germans or Sarmatians. Though the Peucini, whom some men call Bastarnae, in language, culture, fixity of habitation, and house-building, conduct themselves as Germans, all are dirty and lethargic. The faces of the chiefs, too, owing to intermarriage, wear to some extent the degraded aspect of Sarmatians while the Venedi have contracted many Sarmatian habits; they are caterans [robbers], infesting all the hills and forests which lie between the Peucini and the Fenni.

And yet these peoples are preferably entered as Germans, since they have fixed abodes, and carry shields, and delight to use their feet and to run fast, all of which are traits opposite to those of the Sarmatians, who live in wagons and on horseback.

The Fenni live in astonishing barbarism and disgusting misery: no arms, no horses, no fixed homes;



herbs for their food, skins for their clothing, earth for their bed. Arrows are all their wealth and for want of iron they tip them with bone. This same hunting is the support of the women as well as of the men, for they accompany the men freely and claim a share of the spoil. Nor have their infants any shelter against wild beasts and rain, except the covering afforded by a few intertwined branches. To these the hunters return: these are the refuge of age; and yet the people think it happier so than to groan over field labor, be encumbered with house-service, and be forever exchanging their own and their neighbors' goods with alternate hopes and fears. Unconcerned towards men, unconcerned towards Heaven, they have achieved a consummation very difficult: they have nothing even to ask for.

Beyond this all else that is reported is legendary: that the Hellusii and Oxiones have human faces and features, the limbs and bodies of beasts. It has not been so ascertained, and I shall leave it an open question.

## 5. JORDANES

### *HISTORY OF THE GOTHIS*

Jordanes was a sixth-century Goth or Alan who had been notary to Gunthigis-Baza, a Gothic chieftain, but who spent part of his later life in Constantinople, where in 551 he composed his *History of the Goths*, largely a summary of Cassiodorus's now lost work of the same name. It combines genuine Gothic oral traditions into the traditional framework of classical ethnography to present the Goths within the broader perspective of Roman and Christian history.

*Source: The Gothic History of Jordanes*, trans. Charles C. Mierow (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1915).  
*Further Reading: James J. O'Donnell, "The Aims of Jordanes," Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte* 31 (1982): 223–40.

### The United Goths

