

Tacitus, *Germania*, 98 CE

*Tacitus was probably born in 56 or 57 CE in Northern Italy into an equestrian (minor noble) family. He had quite a successful career in Roman public service, holding both military and civil offices, culminating in becoming the proconsul of the Roman province of Asia, 112-113 CE. He wrote a several literary and historical works, many of which criticize faults in Roman society by comparing them to others. Germania is not a travel story, nor even a personal account. Instead, Tacitus drew upon earlier writers, and possibly talked to contemporaries who had been there to compile an ethnographic and geographical description of Germania (which includes parts of present-day France and Germany), especially the customs and culture of the various tribes who lived there, whom the Romans generally called “barbarians.”*¹

1.

The various peoples of Germany are separated from the Gauls by the Rhine, from the Raetians and Pannonians by the Danube, and from the Sarmatians and Dacians by mountains - or, where there are no mountains, by mutual fear. The northern parts of the country are girdled by the sea, flowing round broad peninsulas and vast islands where a campaign of the present century has revealed to us the existence of some nations and kings hitherto unknown. The Rhine rises in a remote and precipitous height of the Raetian Alps and afterwards turns slightly westward to flow into the North Sea. The Danube issues from a gentle slope of moderate height in the Black Forest, and after passing more peoples than the Rhine in its course discharges itself into the Black Sea through six channels – a seventh mouth being lost in marshlands.

2.

As to the Germans themselves, I think it probable that they are indigenous and that very little foreign blood has been introduced either by invasions or by friendly dealings with neighbouring peoples. For in former times it was not by land but on shipboard that would-be immigrants arrived; and the limitless ocean that lies beyond the coasts of Germany, and as it were defies intruders, is seldom visited by ships from our part of the world. And to say nothing of the perils of that wild and unknown sea, who would have been likely to leave Asia Minor, North Africa, or Italy, to go to Germany with its forbidding landscapes and unpleasant climate - a country that is thankless to till and dismal to behold for anyone who was not born and bred there?

In the traditional songs which form their only record of the past the Germans celebrate an earth-born god called Tuisto. His son Mannus is supposed to be the fountain-head of their race and himself to have begotten three sons who gave their names to three groups of tribes - the Ingaevones, nearest the sea; the Herminones, in the interior; and the Istaevones, who comprise all the rest. Some authorities, with the freedom of conjecture permitted by remote antiquity, assert that Tuisto had more numerous descendants and mention more tribal groups such as Marsi, Gambrivii, Suebi, and Vandilii—names which they affirm to be both genuine and ancient.

The name Germania, however, is said to have been only recently applied to the country. The first people to cross the Rhine and appropriate Gallic territory, though they are known nowadays as Tungri, were at that

¹ Text from and introduction adapted from H. Mattingly, “Introduction” in Tacitus, *The Agricola and the Germania* (Penguin Classics, 1970).

time called Germani; and what was at first the name of this one tribe not of the entire race, gradually came into general use in the wider sense. It was first applied to the whole people by the conquerors of the Gauls, to frighten them; later, all the Germans adopted it and called themselves by the new name

3.

The Germans, like many other peoples, are said to have been visited by Hercules, and they sing of him as the foremost of all the heroes when they are about to engage in battle. (They also have the well-known kind of chant that they call baritus. By the rendering of this they not only kindle their courage, but, merely by listening to the sound, they can forecast the issue of an approaching engagement. For they either terrify their foes or themselves become frightened, according to the character of the noise they make upon the battlefield; and they regard it not merely as so many voices chanting together but as a unison of valour. What they particularly aim at is a harsh, intermittent roar; and they hold their shields in front of their mouths, so that the sound is amplified into a deeper crescendo by the reverberation.)

Ulysses also, in all those fabled wanderings of his, is supposed by some to have reached the northern sea and visited German lands, and to have founded and named Asciburgium, a town on the Rhine inhabited to this day. They even add that an altar consecrated by Ulysses and inscribed also with the name of his father Laertes was discovered long ago at this same place, and that certain barrows with monuments upon them bearing Greek inscriptions still exist on the borders of Germany and Raetia. I do

not intend to argue either for or against these assertions; each man must accept or reject them as he feels inclined.

4.

For myself, I accept the view that the peoples of Germany have never contaminated themselves by intermarriage with foreigners but remain of pure blood, distinct and unlike any other nation. One result of this is that their physical characteristics, in so far as one can generalize about such a large population, are always the same: fierce-looking blue eyes, reddish hair, and big frames -which, however, can exert their strength only by means of violent effort. They are less able to endure toil or fatiguing tasks and cannot bear thirst or heat, though their climate has inured them to cold spells and the poverty of their soil to hunger.

5.

The appearance of the country differs considerably in different parts; but in general it is covered either by bristling forests or by foul swamps. It is wetter on the side that faces Gaul, windier on the side of Noricum and Pannonia. A good soil for cereal crops, it will not grow fruit-trees. It is well provided with live-stock; but the animals are mostly undersized, and even the cattle lack the handsome heads that are their natural glory. It is the mere number of them that the Germans take pride in; for these are the only form of wealth they have, and are much prized. Silver and gold have been denied them -whether as a sign of divine favour or of divine wrath, I cannot say. Yet I would not positively assert that there are no deposits of silver or gold in Germany, since no one has prospected for them. The natives take less pleasure than most people do in possessing and handling these metals; indeed, one can see in their houses silver vessels, which have

been presented to chieftains or to ambassadors travelling abroad, put to the same everyday uses as earthenware. Those who live on the frontiers nearest us, however, do value gold and silver-for their use in commerce, being quick to recognize and pick out certain of our coin-types. (The tribes of the interior stick to the simpler and more ancient practice of barter.) They like old-fashioned coins because they have been long familiar with them - especially those which have notched edges and are stamped with representations of two-horse chariots. They also prefer silver to gold, not from any special liking for the metal, but because a quantity of silver coins is more convenient for buying ordinary cheap merchandise.

6.

Even iron is not plentiful; this has been inferred from the sort of weapons they have. Only a few of them use swords or large lances: they carry spears - called frameae in their language - with short and narrow blades, but so sharp and easy to handle that they can be used, as required, either at close quarters or in long-range fighting. Their horsemen are content with a shield and a spear; but the foot-soldiers also rain javelins on their foes: each of them carries several, and they hurl them to immense distances, being naked or lightly clad in short cloaks. There is nothing ostentatious about their equipment: only their shields are picked out in the colours of their choice. Few have breastplates, and only one here and there a helmet of metal or hide. Their horses are not remarkable for either beauty or speed, and are not trained to execute various evolutions as ours are; they ride them straight ahead, or with just a single wheel to the right, keeping their line so well that not a man falls behind the rest. Generally speaking, their strength lies in infantry rather than cavalry. So foot-soldiers

accompany the cavalry into action, their speed of foot being such that they can easily keep up with the charging horsemen. The best men are chosen from the whole body of young warriors and placed with the cavalry in front of the main battle-line. The number of these is precisely fixed: a hundred are drawn from each district, and 'The Hundred' is the name they bear among their fellow-countrymen. Thus what was originally a mere number has come to be a title of distinction. The battle-line is made up of wedge-shaped formations. To give ground, provided that you return to the attack, is considered good tactics rather than cowardice. They bring back the bodies of the fallen even when a battle hangs in the balance. To throw away one's shield is the supreme disgrace, and the man who has thus dishonoured himself is debarred from attendance at sacrifice or assembly. Many such survivors from the battlefield have ended their shame by hanging themselves.

7.

They choose their kings for their noble birth, their commanders for their valour. The power even of the kings is not absolute or arbitrary. The commanders rely on example rather than on the authority of their rank - on the admiration they win by showing conspicuous energy and courage and by pressing forward in front of their own troops. Capital punishment, imprisonment, even flogging, are allowed to none but the priests, and are not inflicted merely as punishments or on the commanders' orders, but as it were in obedience to the god whom the Germans believe to be present on the field of battle. They actually carry with them into the fight certain figures and emblems taken from their sacred groves. A specially powerful incitement to valour is that the squadrons and divisions are not made up at

random by the mustering of chance-comers, but are each composed of men of one family or clan. Close by them, too, are their nearest and dearest, so that they can hear the shrieks of their women-folk and the wailing of their children. These are the witnesses whom each man reverences most highly: whose praise he most desires. It is to their mothers and wives that they go to have their wounds treated, and the women are not afraid to count and compare the gashes. They also carry supplies of food to the combatants and encourage them.

8.

It stands on record that armies already wavering and on the point of collapse have been rallied by the women, pleading heroically with their men, thrusting forward their bared bosoms, and making them realize the imminent prospect of enslavement - a fate which the Germans fear more desperately for their women than for themselves. Indeed, you can secure a surer hold on these nations if you compel them to include among a consignment of hostages some girls of noble family. More than this, they believe that there resides in women an element of holiness and a gift of prophecy; and so they do not scorn to ask their advice, or lightly disregard their replies. In the reign of the emperor Vespasian we saw Valeda long honoured by many Germans as a divinity; and even earlier they showed a similar reverence for Aurinia and a number of others - a reverence untainted by servile flattery or any pretence of turning women into goddesses...

13.

They transact no business, public or private, without being armed. But it is a rule that no one shall carry arms until the state authorities are

satisfied that he will be competent to use them. Then, in the presence of the Assembly, either one of the chiefs or the young man's father or some other relative presents him with a shield and a spear. These, among the Germans, are the equivalent of the man's toga with us - the first distinction publicly conferred upon a youth, who now ceases to rank merely as a member of a household and becomes a citizen. Particularly noble birth, or great services rendered by their fathers, can obtain the rank of chief for boys still in their teens. They are attached to others of more mature strength who have been approved some years before, and none of them blushes to be seen in a chief's retinue of followers. There are grades of rank even in these retinues, determined at the discretion of the chief whom they follow; and there is great rivalry, both among the followers to obtain the highest place in their leader's estimation and among the chiefs for the honour of having the biggest and most valiant retinue. Both prestige and power depend on being continually attended by a large train of picked young warriors, which is a distinction in peace and a protection in war. And it is not only in a chief's own nation that the superior number and quality of his retainers brings him glory and renown. Neighbouring states honour them also, courting them with embassies and complimenting them with presents. Very often the mere reputation of such men will virtually decide the issue of a war.

14.

On the field of battle it is a disgrace to a chief to be surpassed in courage by his followers, and to the followers not to equal the courage of their chief. And to leave a battle alive after their chief has fallen means lifelong infamy and shame. To defend and protect him, and to let him get the credit for their own acts of heroism, are the most solemn obligations of

their allegiance. The chiefs fight for victory, the followers for their chief. Many noble youths, if the land of their birth is stagnating in a long period of peace and inactivity, deliberately seek out other tribes which have some war in hand. For the Germans have no taste for peace; renown is more easily won among perils, and a large body of retainers cannot be kept together except by means of violence and war. They are always making demands on the generosity of their chief, asking for a coveted war-horse or a spear stained with the blood of a defeated enemy. Their meals, for which plentiful if homely fare is provided, count in lieu of pay. The wherewithal for this openhandedness comes from war and plunder. A German is not so easily prevailed upon to plough the land and wait patiently for harvest as to challenge a foe and earn wounds for his reward. He thinks it tame and spiritless to accumulate slowly by the sweat of his brow what can be got quickly by the loss of a little blood.

15.

When not engaged in warfare they spend a certain amount of time in hunting, but much more in idleness, thinking of nothing else but sleeping and eating. For the boldest and most warlike men have no regular employment, the care of house, home, and fields being left to the women, old men, and weaklings of the family. In thus dawdling away their time they show a strange inconsistency - at one and the same time loving indolence and hating peace.

It is a national custom for gifts of cattle or agricultural produce to be made to the chiefs, individual citizens making voluntary contributions for this purpose. These are accepted as tokens of honour, but serve also to supply their wants. They take particular pleasure in gifts received from

neighbouring states, such as are sent not only by individuals but by communities as well - choice horses, splendid arms, metal discs, and collars. And we have now taught them to accept presents of money also.

16.

It is a well-known fact that the peoples of Germany never live in cities and will not even have their houses adjoin one another. They dwell apart, dotted about here and there, wherever a spring, plain, or grove takes their fancy. Their villages are not laid out in the Roman style, with buildings adjacent and connected. Every man leaves an open space round his house, perhaps as a precaution against the risk of fire, perhaps because they are inexpert builders. They do not even make use of stones or wall-tiles; for all purposes they employ rough-hewn timber, ugly and unattractive-looking. Some parts, however, they carefully smear over with a clay of such purity and brilliance that it looks like painting or coloured design. They also have the habit of hollowing out underground caves, which they cover with masses of manure and use both as refuges from the winter and as storehouses for produce. Such shelters temper the keenness of the frosts; and if an invader comes, he ravages the open country, while these hidden excavations are either not known to exist, or else escape detection simply because they cannot be found without a search.

17.

The universal dress in Germany is a cloak fastened with a brooch or, failing that, a thorn. They pass whole days by the fireside wearing no garment but this. It is a mark of great wealth to wear undergarments, which are not loose like those of the Sarmatians and Parthians, but fit tightly and follow the contour of every limb. They also wear the skins of wild animals

- the tribes near the river frontiers without any regard to appearance, the more distant tribes with some refinement of taste, since in their part of the country there is no finery to be bought. These latter people select animals with care, and after stripping off the hides decorate them with patches of the skin of creatures that live in the Unknown seas of the outer ocean. The dress of the women differs from that of the men in two respects only: women often wear outer garments of linen ornamented with a purple pattern; and as the upper part of these is sleeveless, the whole of their arms, and indeed the parts of their breasts nearest the shoulders, are exposed.

18.

Their marriage code, however, is strict, and no feature of their morality deserves higher praise. They are almost unique among barbarians in being content with one wife apiece - all of them, that is, except a very few who take more than one wife not to satisfy their desires but because their exalted rank brings them many pressing offers of matrimonial alliances. The dowry is brought by husband to wife, not by wife to husband. Parents and kinsmen attend and approve the gifts - not gifts chosen to please a woman's fancy or gaily deck a young bride, but oxen, a horse with its bridle, or a shield, spear, and sword. In consideration of such gifts a man gets his wife, and she in her turn brings a present of arms to her husband. This interchange of gifts typifies for them the most sacred bond of union, sanctified by mystic rites under the favour of the presiding deities of wedlock. The woman must not think that she is excluded from aspirations to manly virtues or exempt from the hazards of warfare. That is why she is reminded, in the very ceremonies which bless her marriage at its outset, that she enters her husband's home to be the partner of his toils and perils,

that both in peace and in war she is to share his sufferings and adventures. That is the meaning of the team of oxen, the horse ready for its rider, and the gift of arms. On these terms she must live her life and bear her children. She is receiving something that she must hand over intact and undepreciated to her children, something for her sons' wives to receive in their turn and pass on to her grandchildren.

19.

By such means is the virtue of their women protected, and they live uncorrupted by the temptations of public shows or the excitements of banquets. Clandestine love-letters are unknown to men and women alike. Adultery is extremely rare, considering the size of the population. A guilty wife is summarily punished by her husband. He cuts off her hair, strips her naked, and in the presence of kinsmen turns her out of his house and flogs her all through the village. They have in fact no mercy on a wife who prostitutes her chastity. Neither beauty, youth, nor wealth can find her another husband. No one in Germany finds vice amusing, or calls it 'up-to-date' to seduce and be seduced. Even better is the practice of those states in which only virgins may marry, so that a woman who has once been a bride has finished with all such hopes and aspirations. She takes one husband, just as she has one body and one life. And even that husband she must love, not for himself, but as an embodiment of the married state. To restrict the number of children, or to kill any of those born after the heir, is considered wicked. Good morality is more effective in Germany than good laws are elsewhere...

27....Such is the general account that we find given of the origin and customs of the Germans as a whole. I shall now point out how far the

individual tribes differ from one another in their institutions and practices, and which of them have migrated from Germany into Gaul.

28.

That the power of Gaul once exceeded that of Germany is recorded by that greatest of authorities, Julius Caesar; and therefore we may well believe that there were also migrations of Gauls into Germany. There was only a river between - a trifling obstacle to prevent any tribe that grew strong enough from seizing fresh lands, and afterwards perhaps exchanging them for others, when they were no one's property and not yet partitioned between powerful monarchies. Thus, between the Hercynian forest and the rivers Rhine and Main, we find the Helvetii in occupation, and beyond them the Boii, both Celtic peoples. This land is still called Bohemia, which attests the ancient tradition concerning it, although the inhabitants have since changed. Whether the Aravisci came as immigrants to Pannonia from the tribe of the Osi, or the Osi from the Aravisci into Germany - both peoples still speak the same language and have the same customs and character - cannot be determined, since there was in those days the same poverty and the same freedom on both banks of the Danube, so that the attractions and disadvantages were identical. The Treviri and Nervii even take pride in the German descent to which they lay claim. Such a glorious origin, they feel, should prevent their being thought to resemble the unwarlike Gauls. The actual bank of the Rhine is held by peoples of undoubted German origin - the Vangiones, the Triboci, and the Nemetes. Even the Ubii, for all that they have earned the rank of a Roman colony and like to call themselves Agrippinenses after their foundress Agrippina, are not ashamed of their ancestry. They crossed the river many years ago,

and as they had given proof of their loyalty to Rome they were stationed close to the west bank, to keep out intruders, not to be kept under surveillance themselves.

29.

The most conspicuously brave of all the German tribes in Gaul, the Batavi, hold little of the river-bank, but do hold the Rhine island. They were once a section of the Chatti, and on the occasion of a civil war they migrated to their present home - destined there to become a part of the Roman empire. But they still retain an honourable privilege in token of their ancient alliance with us. They are not subjected to the indignity of tribute or ground down by the tax-gatherer. Free from imposts and special levies, and reserved for employment in battle, they are like weapons and armour - 'only to be used in war'. We exercise the same suzerainty over the Mattiaci; for the greatness of Rome has spread the awe of her empire even beyond the Rhine and the old frontiers. In geographical position they are on the German side, in heart and soul they are with us. They resemble the Batavi in every way, except that their country and climate give an even keener edge to their spirit.

I am not inclined to reckon among the peoples of Germany the cultivators of the *agri decumates*, although they have established themselves between the Rhine and the Danube. All the most disreputable characters in Gaul, all the penniless adventurers, seized on a territory that was a kind of no man's land. It was only later, when the frontier line of defence was drawn and the garrisons moved forward, that they came to be regarded as an outlying corner of the empire and a part of a province.

30.

Beyond them dwell the Chatti, whose country starts from the Hercynian forest; it is less open and less marshy than the other states that stretch across the wide plains of Germany. For the hills run on and only thin out gradually; and the Hercynian forest, like a nurse with her infant cares, escorts its Chatti throughout and finally sets them down at the edge of the plains. This nation is distinguished by hardy bodies, well-knit limbs, fierce countenances, and unusual mental vigour. They have plenty of judgement and discernment, measured by German standards. They appoint picked men to lead them, and then obey them. They know how to keep rank and how to recognize an opportunity - or else postpone their attack. They can map out the duties of the day and make sure the defences of the night. They know that fortune is not to be relied on, but only valour; and – the rarest thing of all, which the gods have vouchsafed only to a military discipline like the Roman - they place more confidence in their general than in their troops. All their strength lies in their infantry, which, in addition to its arms, is burdened with entrenching-tools and provisions. Other tribes may be seen going forth to battle; the Chatti come out for a campaign. They seldom engage in swift rushes or in casual fighting - tactics which properly belong to cavalry, with its quick successes and quick retreats. Speed suggests something very like fear, whereas deliberate movement rather indicates a steady courage...

40.

The Langobardi, by contrast, are famous because they are so few. Hemmed in as they are by many mighty peoples, they find safety, not in submission, but in facing the risks of battle. After them come the Reudigni, Aviones, Anglii, Varini, Eudoses, Suarines, and Nuitones, all of them safe

behind ramparts of rivers and woods. There is nothing noteworthy about these tribes individually, but they share a common worship of Nerthus, or Mother Earth. They believe that she takes part in human affairs, riding in a chariot among her people. On an island of the sea stands an inviolate grove, in which, veiled with a cloth, is a chariot that none but the priest may touch. The priest can feel the presence of the goddess in this holy of holies, and attends her with deepest reverence as her chariot is drawn along by cows. Then follow days of rejoicing and merrymaking in every place that she condescends to visit and sojourn in. No one goes to war, no one takes up arms; every iron object is locked away. Then, and then only, are peace and quiet known and welcomed, until the goddess, when she has had enough of the society of men, is restored to her sacred precinct by the priest. After that, the chariot, the vestments, and (believe it if-you will) the goddess herself, are cleansed in a secluded lake. This service is performed by slaves who are immediately afterwards drowned in the lake. Thus mystery begets terror and a pious reluctance to ask what that sight can be which is seen only by men' doomed to die.

41.

The section of the Suebian territory that I have described stretches out into the less-known part of Germany. Nearer to us - to follow now the course of the Danube as we previously followed that of the Rhine - are our faithful allies the Hermunduri. Because they are so loyal, they are the only Germans who trade with us not merely on the river bank but far within our borders, and indeed in the splendid colony that is the capital of Raetia. They come over where they will, and without a guard set over them. The other Germans are only allowed to see our armed camps; to the

Hermunduri we exhibit our mansions and country-houses without their coveting them. In their country are the sources of the Elbe, a river well known and much talked of in earlier days, but now a mere name.

42.

Next to the Hermunduri dwell the Naristi, followed by the Marcomanni and the Quadi. The Marcomanni are conspicuous in reputation and power: even their homeland, from which they drove out the Boii, was won by their bravery., Nor do the Naristi and Quadi fall below their high standard. These peoples form the front, so to speak, presented to us by that part of Germany which is girdled by the Danube. Down to our own times the Marcomanni and Quadi still had kings of their own race, the noble line of Maroboduus and Tudrus; but now they sometimes have foreign rulers set over them. The power of the kings depends entirely on the authority of Rome. They occasionally receive armed assistance from us, more often financial aid, which proves equally effective.

43.

Close behind the Marcomanni and Quadi are the Marsigni, Cotini, Osi, and Buri. Of these, the Marsigni and Buri are exactly like the Suebi in language and mode of life. The Cotini and the Osi are not Germans: that is proved by their languages, Celtic in the one case, Pannonian in the other, and also by the fact that they submit to paying tribute. The payments are exacted from them, as foreigners, by the Quadi and by the Sarmatians respectively - of which the Cotini have all the more reason to be ashamed inasmuch as they work iron mines.

All these peoples are settled in country with few plains, consisting mostly of mountains and upland valleys. Suebia, in fact, is cut in two down

the middle by an unbroken range of mountains, beyond which live a multitude of tribes, of whom the Lugii are the most widely spread, being divided into a number of smaller units. Ineed only give the names of the most powerful: the Harii, Helvecones, Manimi, Helisii, and Naharvali.

The Naharvali proudly point out a grove associated with an ancient worship. The presiding priest dresses like a woman; but the deities are said to be the counterpart of our Castor and Pollux. This indicates their character, but their name is the Alei. There are no images, and nothing to suggest that the cult is of foreign origin; but they are certainly worshipped as young men and as brothers. As for the Harii, not only are they superior in strength to the other peoples I have just mentioned, but they minister to their savage instincts by trickery and clever timing. They black their shields and dye their bodies, and choose pitch dark nights for their battles: The shadowy, awe-inspiring appearance of such a ghoulish army inspires mortal panic; for no enemy can endure a sight so strange and hellish.