

THE EARLY GERMANS

from *The Middle Ages* by Dana Carleton Munro, 1921

The early Germans played such an important role during the Middle Ages, all that can be gleaned concerning their primitive institutions is of peculiar interest. In recent years our knowledge of their history and customs has been greatly increased by careful archaeological studies, by the comparison and criticism of the various passages in the classical authors, and by an examination of their early laws. But the most important single source is still Tacitus' *Germania*, from which much of this chapter is either quoted or paraphrased. The racial customs which Tacitus described were long maintained by the Germans and played a large part in shaping the destinies of western Europe.

The German tribes had their settlements in the central and northern parts of Europe, and the territory which they occupied extended southward from the Scandinavian peninsula to the Danube. The Rhine was their western boundary and the Vistula River marked approximately their farthest extent to the east. This land which the Germans held was neither especially fertile nor attractive. According to Pomponius Mela, "it was traversed by many rivers and was rough with mountains, and was for the most part impassable on account of the forests and swamps." "Who indeed," wrote Tacitus, "would leave Asia or Africa or Italy to seek Germany, with its desert scenery, its harsh climate, its sullen manners and aspect? In general the country, though varying here and there in appearance, is covered with wild forests and filthy swamps."

The German was the child of those forests and swamps. In them he learned to endure hunger and cold. He was usually a nomad and made his living by hunting or by tending his herds of cattle, which were numerous, but of very poor quality. In addition some German tribes had great herds of swine which roamed in the woods and some kept poultry and bees. The only handicraft commonly practiced by men was that of the smith. They knew the use of iron, from which they wrought their weapons, and they could make ornaments out of gold. The women wove linen, made soap, tanned leather for shoes, and baked vessels of earthenware. Although their culture was thus limited, they proved afterwards to have a great capacity for advance.

They were a hardy, vigorous race; weak or deformed infants were exposed and left to die. The children who were to be raised were early inured to hardships, and those who survived grew to a stature which seemed gigantic to the smaller Romans. They were blonds with "fierce blue eyes" and reddish or golden hair, which they allowed to grow long, as the visible mark of their freedom. They were fitful and passionate in temper and often of a gloomy nature." Their song echoes to a homelier note of sorrow – to hunger and cold, howl of wolf, grinding of ice, exile and misery of friendless men, bitter toil on a wintry ocean; such is the shadow to which a fierceness of delight in battle and slaughter makes only the contrast. " (Gummere) In fact, courage was the special virtue, and cowardice the unpardonable sin. Weaklings and cowards were cast into miry swamps and a hurdle placed over their heads, so that their infamy might be blotted out from human sight. The virtue which next to valor seems to be especially noteworthy was the hospitality practiced by the Germans. No other race indulged more freely in

entertainments and ungrudging hospitality. It was considered a crime for a German to turn any man away from his door.

Drunkenness and gambling were the most prominent vices. It was held to be no disgrace to spend the whole day and night in drinking. Tacitus, a sagacious Roman, suggested : “ If you should indulge their love of drinking by furnishing them as much as they wanted, they might be conquered more easily by their vices than by arms. “ They gambled with such great recklessness that when everything else was gone they staked their liberty and their own persons on the last decisive throw. The loser went into voluntary slavery. Though he might be the younger and the stronger of the two, he suffered himself to be bound and led away. Because of these vices and some other points of resemblance it has sometimes been customary to compare the early Germans with the American Indians of colonial days; but the former were already more advanced than the latter and had a greater capacity for making further progress.

The Germans had no cities, as they preferred to live in villages made up of separate houses surrounded by open spaces. These houses, or huts, were built of wood, and were intended mainly for summer use; in winter the people took refuge in holes underground covered with great heaps of manure for the sake of warmth. The summer dwellings were small and sometimes very light so that they could be moved easily from place to place. The fire was made in the center of the hut; there was no chimney, and the smoke escaped as best it could. As the roof was constructed of reeds or straw it was very inflammable and the houses often caught fire and burned to the ground. Fortunately they could be rebuilt with little exertion.

All the clothing was made by the women. Among the more barbarous tribes furs were usually worn, but most of the German men and women had woolen or linen garments; the children of all classes grew up naked. For ornaments, the wealthy wore golden rings upon the arms or neck or fingers. Their favorite food appears to be horse-flesh; they also ate game, beef, mutton, fish, geese, and chickens; in addition they had oats, barley, wheat , and some vegetables. Honey was much used, both for sweetening and in the preparation of their national drink, mead. They knew how to obtain salt from the salt springs.

Their religion was a mixture of the worship of their ancestors and of the powers of nature. Their mythology included the belief in many gods, spirits of the air, of the water, and of the woods; they had faith also in witches and divination. They worshipped usually in groves and sometimes upon islands. To the shades of their ancestors they made offerings of food; to the gods they sacrificed animals and occasionally human beings. After an animal had been duly offered to the god, the worshippers feasted upon the flesh; possibly this was also done in the case of human sacrifices. Horses were the animals most commonly used for sacrifice, and the eating of horse-flesh was condemned by the later Christians on account of its association with the pagan worship. The priests had great authority among the Germans and they alone were allowed to inflict blows upon a free man.

The Germans believed that women had “ a certain sanctity and prophetic gift “. Their

“ wise women “ were supposed to be able to interpret or express the will of the gods; and after death some of them became local deities and later still they were metamorphosed into Christian saints. Women performed the bulk of the labor among the Germans; they not only carried on the household crafts, but also cultivated the fields, while the men, when they were not engaged in hunting or fighting, usually spent their time in idleness, sleeping, drinking, or gambling. The Germans usually had only one wife; but a chieftain might marry several women, in order to form alliances with other tribes. The wife was usually purchased from her father, by the gift of horses, oxen, or weapons, and in case of need could be sold again by her husband. The women were extolled by Tacitus for their chastity and fertility; in his extreme praise, however, he is probably contrasting them with Roman women.

The Germans chose their chieftains from the families which were considered to be the noblest. Distinguished rank or great services on the part of their parents sometimes won even for mere striplings the claim to be ranked as chiefs. But the latter did not have much power in times of peace and were not necessarily the leaders in battle, for the commanders in war were chosen on account of their valor, and when chosen led by example rather than authority, winning admiration and obedience only when they were energetic and fought well. During the later migrations a successful leader won for himself greater authority than the early chiefs had possessed and frequently became king of his people.

Public business was transacted in the assemblies, and there, too, important judicial matters were decided. The people met “ either at the new moon or at the full moon “ in some open place; all free men had a right to be present, except those who were in disgrace because they had fled from the field of battle and left their shields behind. When a sufficient number had come together, the priests proclaimed silence and kept order. The latter duty was sometimes no sinecure, as the men came fully armed. Concerning minor matters the chiefs deliberated; but in important affairs all the people were consulted, although the subjects referred to the common people for judgment had been discussed beforehand by the chiefs. A chieftain or some leader addressed them, each being heard according to his age, his noble blood, his reputation in warfare, or his eloquence, though more because he had the power to persuade than because he had the right to command. If an opinion was displeasing they rejected it by shouting; if they agreed to it they clashed with their spears. The most complimentary form of assent was that expressed by means of their weapons. No one was allowed to assume arms until the tribe had recognized his competence to use them. Then in the full assembly some one of the chiefs, or the father or the relations of the youth, invested him with the shield and the spear. This was the sign that the lad had reached the age of manhood; this was his first honor. Before this he had only been a member of a household; hereafter he was a member of the tribe. Lawsuits and accusations of serious crime were brought before the assembly. Questions of guilt were determined by ordeal of various kinds. For the convicted, unless he was sentenced to death as a traitor or deserter, the penalty was usually a fine. Even murder entailed only the payment of a sum of money, comparatively large, but established in amount by law, provided that the kinsmen were willing to accept compensation. If the latter preferred,

they had the right to attempt revenge, and others could interfere only by their influence, not by punishment of the avengers.

Frequently it was impossible to persuade the kinsmen to accept a payment, because the Germans dearly loved fighting. If the tribe to which they belonged was at peace for any length of time, many of the noble youths voluntarily sought other tribes that were at war, because a quiet life was irksome and they gained renown more readily in the midst of perils. Consequently the young men enrolled themselves under the leadership of some chief renowned in war, who furnished them with food and shelter, their war-horse and weapons, securing the means for this bounty by war and plunder, or through the gifts which poured into him on account of his reputation. When they went into battle it was a disgrace for the chief to be outdone in deeds of valor and for his band of followers – the *comitatus* – not to match the courage of their chief; furthermore any one of the followers to have survived his chief and come unharmed out of a battle was lifelong infamy. It was in accordance with their most sacred oath of allegiance to defend and protect their leader and to contribute their brave deeds to his renown. The chief fought for victory; the men of his following, for the chief. Ammianus Marcellinus tells of a German king who surrendered after the emperor Julian had defeated the Alamanni at Strassburg; and his “companions, two hundred in number, and his three most intimate friends, thinking it would be a crime in them to survive their king, or not to die for him if the occasion required, gave themselves up also as prisoners.”

The knowledge concerning the Germans which has been summarized above was gained by the Romans only very gradually, from their contact with them. Except for the accounts of isolated travelers and traders, their first acquaintance with the Germans came through warfare. This began when the northern tribes made their invasion of the southern and western lands in 113 B. C. Then the Cimbri and Teutons came down from the north with their women and children and all their property, and defeated a Roman consul at Noreia near the river Drave, in what is now German Austria. They did not follow up their victory nor enter Roman territory for some years, but moved westward instead. Twelve years elapsed before Rome was strong enough to destroy these threatening barbarians; in the meantime the latter had won three great victories and many tribes along the border had been incited to revolt. The barbarians were finally defeated by Marius; the uprisings on the border were put down, and peace ensued for forty years. During the period of Caesar's governorship in Gaul there was another great conflict. In 58 B. C. the whole Helvetian people, numbering 368,000 attempted to enter that province, seeking better and more extensive lands. Caesar finally succeeded in driving them back. During the following years German tribes which had already settled in Gaul were expelled and the frontier of the Roman Empire was pushed forward to the Rhine. Though Caesar made two expeditions across this river, he intended them merely as military demonstrations and apparently had no desire to extend the Roman frontier beyond the Rhine.

For some time after Caesar's campaigns the Germans remained comparatively quiet, though in 38 B.C. there was an invasion which the Roman general Agrippa, repelled. The latter then began the policy of establishing tribes of Germans along the border within the Empire; for he hoped the jealousy of the natives on one hand, and the fear of

depredations by their less fortunate countrymen across the river on the other hand, would keep the Germans faithful to their Roman allies. Later this policy was carried out very extensively. After other invasions the Romans built fortresses along the left bank of the Rhine; some of these have grown into important modern towns, such as Basel, Strassburg, Speyer, Worms, Mainz, Bingen, Coblenz, Andernach, Bonn, and Cologne. Along the southern bank of the Danube, too, the Romans established stations; to this Regensburg (Ratisbon), Passau, and Vienna owe their origins. These fortresses and the excellent military roads which connected them made the frontiers fairly safe.

Under Drusus, in 12 B. C., the Romans attempted a forward movement into Germany. Three campaigns did not result in any particular conquests by the Romans, but did check German aggressions. Later the Romans advanced to the Elbe and placed on its farther bank an altar to Augustus. Other expeditions followed which impressed the Germans with the power and wealth of Rome. Young chieftains went to Rome to learn Roman ways, and for a while all the northern tribes appeared to be either subdued or won over by diplomacy. But this seeming security was rudely interrupted by the defeat of Varus in 9 A.D. He had attempted to introduce Roman methods of taxation and government, whereas previously the tribes had been allowed to manage their own affairs. Arminius aroused the Germans to resistance. Varus was suddenly and treacherously attacked and his three legions were destroyed. In despair he committed suicide. This was a crushing blow to the Romans; when the news reached Augustus, it is said that he beat his head against the wall of his chamber, crying frantically, “ Varus, Varus, give me back my legions .” The Empire was not in a position to send out fresh legions and conquer Germany thoroughly; consequently, Augustus, in his testament, advised his successors not to attempt any advance, and the Rhine, from Coblenz downward was accepted again as the Roman boundary.

The Roman commanders realized, however, that energetic measures were required to avert the danger of an invasion by the Germans. Various emperors strengthened the fortifications along the Rhine/Danube frontier and included within the line of defense the *agri decimates* or “ tithed lands “. The latter was the territory which lay between the upper Rhine, the Neckar, and upper Danube. The fortified rampart which defended this, the *Limes* , which had been known popularly as the *Teufelsmauer*, was probably the work of Hadrian. Trajan conquered Dacia, the country which lay north of the lower Danube, and settled it with colonists, partly as a defense against the barbarians, and partly for the sake of its rich mines. Trajan’s conquest and Hadrian’s fortifications checked the Germans, although there was intermittent fighting along the frontier and Marcus Aurelius had to conduct a long and disastrous war against the Marcomanni and Quadi, when Italy itself was invaded and the Germans were defeated only with great difficulty. In the third century there were repeated incursions into the Empire by the Germans, and the province of Dacia was conquered by them. At the end of the century the Rhine – Danube frontier was still intact, but on the farther bank the enemies were numerous and threatening.

The Romans also found it advisable to admit some Germans into the Empire in various capacities. The captives made in the early wars had been sold as slaves, and since they were barbarians, had usually been employed in manual labor. Other Germans, as already

noted, had already been colonized along the frontiers or had been granted lands elsewhere in the Empire. In the second century one band of Germans was located even as far south as Ravenna in Italy. Later whole tribes were allowed to settle in Roman territory, were granted land, and were enrolled as Roman soldiers; so that in the fourth century the army had come to be composed mainly of Germans. Many of the soldiers had risen in rank and had become high imperial officials, especially in the fourth century; so that they gained great distinction and married Roman women. The German type of beauty, both in men and women, was much admired by the Roman ladies, and it became fashionable to dye the hair to make it resemble that of the Germans, or to wear wigs made of real German hair. In addition, many hostages, usually the sons of chieftains, had been carried to Rome or Constantinople, where they acquired the knowledge of Roman military methods which later they made use of against the Romans. In all these ways the Germans had entered into the Roman Empire; and although it is impossible to make any estimate of their numbers on the eve of their migrations, they formed the main part of the Roman army and held many of the offices of the state.

Romans, too, had gone among the Germans; of these the traders had been the most important. The chief articles exported by the Germans were slaves, amber, furs, linen, soap, and goose feathers. In return they desired trinkets such as barbarians have always coveted. Consequently the trade was very profitable to the Romans, especially as the traders probably enjoyed the advantages of traditional German hospitality. From these men the German acquired not only their ornaments, but also some ideas of Roman civilization. After Rome had become Christian, missionaries visited and worked among the Germans, but it was only at a comparatively late date that their labors met with any great reward. From contact with the Roman armies, from traders and travelers, from their countrymen who returned after living in Rome, the Germans gradually became acquainted with some features of the Roman civilization, and had their minds filled with the wonders of the southland, the home and source of so many things that they so greatly desired. Consequently, as their knowledge increased, the impetus to invasion and acquisition constantly became stronger.

The Romans had checked the Germans partly by fighting and partly by paying tribute. Since the days of Marcus Aurelius, if not before, the Romans had paid the Germans to refrain from attack. Many tribes received from the imperial government regular subventions conditional upon their good behavior. But the Romans had relied still more upon the prestige of the Roman name. It is impossible at the present day to conceive of the impression made upon the barbarians by the might and grandeur of Rome. The words ascribed to the aged German chief, when admitted to Tiberius' camp on the Elbe, are probably fictitious, but represent, although in an exaggerated form, the feeling of many a German who had seen the marvels of Rome : “ What madness is this of ours, to contend against the unseen divinities, and not humbly seek their presence and make submission to their benign authority ! “

Lastly, the traditional policy of the Romans had been very effective. For several hundred years they had used with great effect their policy of “ divide and rule “, *divide et impera*. From the time of Caesar they had employed agents to foment trouble and to prevent

union among the Germans. Their desires were well expressed by Tacitus “ This was a special favor and kindness of the gods toward us. They did not even grudge us the sight of the battle. Above sixty thousand men fell, not beneath the arms of Roman soldiers, but, what is grander, for their delight and pleasure. I pray that there may continue to exist among these tribes, if not a love of us, at least a hatred of one another, while the destinies of the Empire drive us on, fortune can offer us nothing better than the discord of our enemies. “ It was partly in the pursuance of this policy that German tribes had been settled within the Empire and enrolled in the army. Many a chieftain like Theodoric the Ostrogoth was employed to fight against his own countrymen. Sometimes whole tribes were thus used. Ammianus Marcellinus says that when Julian felt anxious about possible attacks from the Alemanni , “ After considering various plans, it seemed best to the Emperor to weaken them by stirring them up against the Burgundians, a warlike people, whose flourishing condition was due to the immense numbers of their young men, and who are therefore to be feared by all their neighbors. “ Such policy as this had held the Germans in check for many generations; but new conditions would rise in the fourth century and caused the great migrations into Roman territory.