

BELLARIA XCIX



Modern statue outside the Austrian parliament building

Publius Cornelius Tacitus (c. AD 56-c. 120)

GERMANIA *de origine et situ Germanorum*

Introduction

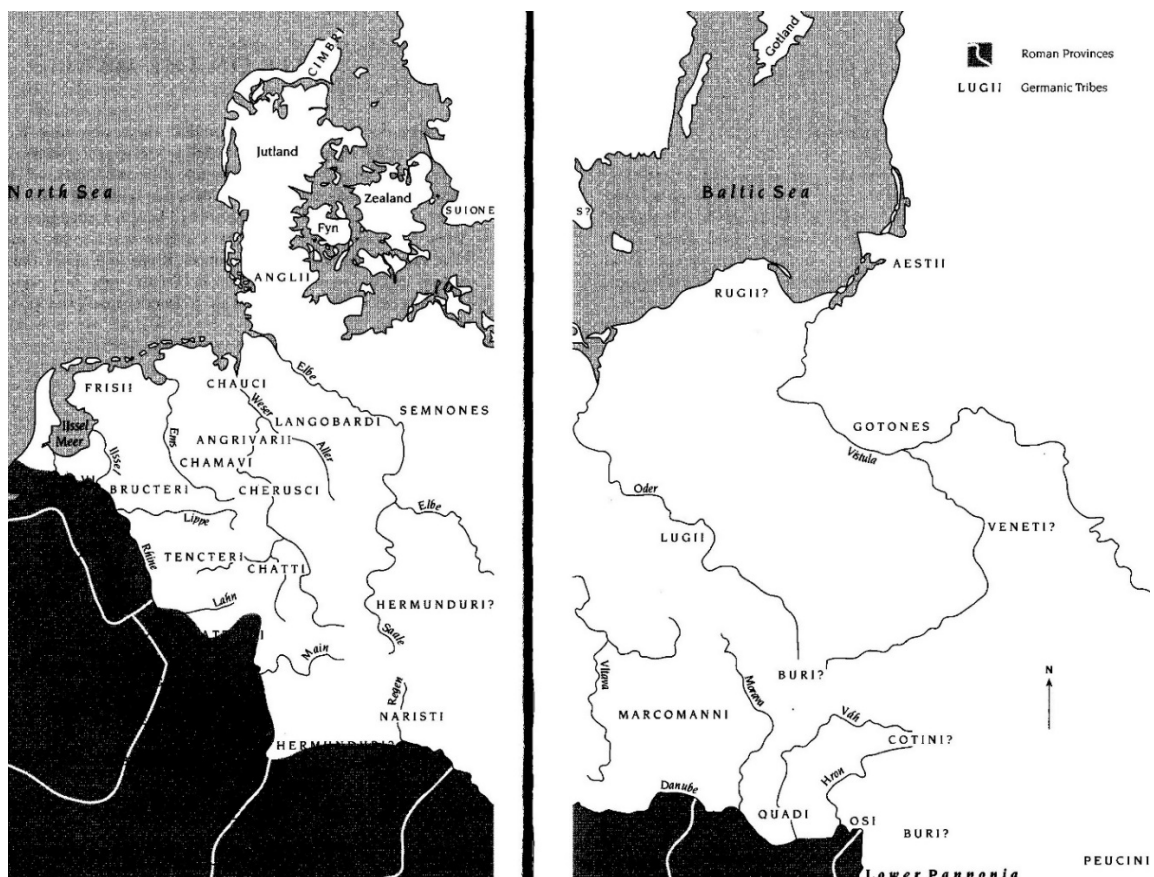
A glance at the map below will show that Tacitus' *Germania* ('German' first occurs in a Greek text—*Germanoi*—from c. 60 BC) inhabited parts, or all, of what we today call Holland, Denmark, Sweden, Germany, Poland, Russia (Kaliningrad), the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Austria. Many of the tribes spoke the Germanic language; all no doubt shared, and differed in, a range of cultural traits with their neighbours. But as far as the Romans were concerned, they were all one people, and a dangerous one at that. It may well be that Julius Caesar in his *Gallic Wars* (50s BC) was the first person to distinguish 'Gauls' from 'Germans', making the Rhine the boundary between them. By characterising the *Germani* as far more primitive, savage and warlike, he turned them into the main threat to Rome, not the Gauls whom he was busy conquering and (presumably) Romanising.

The Romans found it difficult to make up their minds about what to do with the Germans. Should they try to pacify them completely, as Domitian claimed to

have done? (Tacitus may well written *Germania* partly to prove the hated emperor wrong!) Or find a way of living with them profitably? At least along the Rhine and Danube borders, Rome did manage to establish the equivalent of client kingdoms, and there is evidence of regular commercial exchange in northern Europe. Trade in luxury items such as amber and furs flourished, and the Roman demand for slaves was met by captives taken in inter-tribal warfare. They certainly found Germans to be excellent soldiers—Julius Caesar had 400 German cavalry in Gaul—and over time they became a regular component of the Roman army.

Little is heard of Tacitus after the collapse of the Roman Empire in the West until the 9th century AD, but even then his *Germania* received little notice. This all changed in the 15th C when Germany humanists—tracing the country’s roots back to Charlemagne’s Holy Roman Empire which covered most of Europe (AD 800)—used Tacitus’ *Germania* to assert that Germany had its own distinct identity as a *nation* far earlier, back in Roman times. Since then the use and abuse of the *Germania* has played a significant part in German politics and cultural and social history.

This selection covers only Tacitus’ view of the customs applying to all *Germani* in general (he ends the treatise by examining the tribes’ individual predilections). His particular selection of customs is often as much a comment on Roman values as it is a description of German.



Tacitus’ ‘map’ of the Germans (from J.B. Rives, *Tacitus: Germania*, Oxford 1999)

An indigenous people (because who would want to live there?)



2 As for the Germans themselves, I believe them to be indigenous and only minimally diluted through immigration by, or alliance with, other races, since those who have previously sought to change their homeland have arrived in ships and not by land, while the vast ocean beyond, and at the opposite end of the earth, so to speak, from us, is rarely visited by vessels from our world. Moreover, even ignoring the dangers of fearful unknown seas, who would leave Asia Minor, Africa or Italy to seek out Germany, a wild land with a harsh climate, dismal in aspect and culture unless it is one's own homeland?

2 ipsos Germanos indigenas crediderim minimeque aliarum gentium aduentibus et hospitibus mixtos, quia nec terra olim, sed classibus aduehebantur qui mutare sedes quaerebant, et inmensus ultra utque sic dixerim aduersus Oceanus raris ab orbe nostro nauibus aditur. quis porro, praeter periculum horridi et ignoti maris, Asia aut Africa aut Italia relicta Germaniam peteret, informem terris, asperam caelo, tristem cultu adspectuque, nisi si patria sit?

Hercules visited; their martial chants



Luther as Hercules among the Germans

3 They also claim that Hercules appeared amongst them, and on the eve of battle they sing of that bravest of all men. They also have a species of chant, they call *barditus*, the repetition of which inspires courage, and they divine the outcome of an imminent battle from the cry itself; they instil or show fear depending on the sound the warriors make, seeming to them not so much a concord of voices as of hearts. They principally affect a harshness of sound, a subdued roaring, their shields close to their mouths so that the voice echoing might achieve a fuller and deeper note.

3 *fuisse apud eos et Herculem memorant, primumque omnium uirorum fortium ituri in proelia canunt. sunt illis haec quoque carmina, quorum relatu, quem barditum uocant, accendunt animos futuraeque pugnae fortunam ipso cantu augurantur. terrent enim trepidantue, prout sonuit acies, nec tam uocis ille quam uirtutis concertus uidetur. adfectatur praecipue asperitas soni et fractum murmur, obiectis ad os scutis, quo plenior et grauior uox repercussu intumescat.*

Ulysses' visit

3 To continue, Ulysses also, in the opinion of some authorities, during his long and fabulous wanderings was carried into this ocean, and reached the shores of Germany. Asciburgium (Asberg), sited on the banks of the Rhine and inhabited

today, was founded and named by him; and also an altar dedicated by Ulysses, with the name of his father Laertes inscribed, was found in the same place, and tumuli and memorial stones carved with Greek letters are still extant in the borderlands between Germany and Raetia. I am not minded to confirm or refute these statements: each according to his opinion may diminish or augment their credibility.

3 ceterum et Ulixen quidam opinantur longo illo et fabuloso errore in hunc Oceanum delatum adisse Germaniae terras, Asciburgiumque, quod in ripa Rheni situm hodieque incolitur, ab illo constitutum nominatumque; aram quin etiam Ulixi consecratam, adiecto Laertae patris nomine, eodem loco olim repertam, monumentaque et tumulos quosdam Graecis litteris inscriptos in confinio Germaniae Raetiaeque adhuc exstare. quae neque confirmare argumentis neque refellere in animo est: ex ingenio suo quisque demat uel addat fidem.

They have not intermarried



'Pure' German

4 For myself I agree with the opinion of those who hold that the German peoples show no traits of intermarriage with other races, being individual, pure, like none other but themselves, such that all, so far as is known with regard to their extensive population, share a common physique: eyes which are fierce and blue in colour, reddish hair, and large frames unsuited to sustained effort: not being therefore tolerant of labouring and working hard, and little able to stand heat and thirst; but used to hunger and cold given their soil and climate.

4 ipse eorum opinionibus accedo, qui Germaniae populos nullis aliis aliarum nationum conubiis infectos propriam et sinceram et tantum sui similem gentem

exstitisse arbitrantur. unde habitus quoque corporum, tamquam in tanto hominum numero, idem omnibus: truces et caerulei oculi, rutilae comae, magna corpora et tantum ad impetum ualida: laboris atque operum non eadem patientia, minimeque sitim aestumque tolerare, frigora atque inedia caelo soloue adsueuerunt.

The terrain, the livestock, the lack of precious metals

5 There are variations in the appearance of their terrain, but generally speaking it consists of either dense forest or unhealthy marsh, damper towards Gaul, windier towards Noricum and Pannonia: good for cereal crops, hostile to fruit trees, rich in livestock though the animals are, for the most part, undersized. The cattle are neither handsome nor possess majestic brows: boasting numbers only, but are the people's sole and welcome means of wealth. The gods have them denied gold and silver, whether from mercy or in anger I cannot say (not that I would claim Germany devoid of gold or silver bearing veins, for who has explored it thoroughly?), though the people scarcely miss the possession or use of such metals.

5 terra etsi aliquanto specie differt, in uniuersum tamen aut siluis horrida aut paludibus foeda, umidior qua Gallias, uentosior qua Noricum ac Pannoniam adspicit; satis ferax, frugiferarum arborum inpatiens, pecorum fecunda, sed plerumque improcera. ne armentis quidem suus honor aut gloria frontis: numero gaudent, eaeque solae et gratissimae opes sunt. Argentum et aurum propitiine an irati di negauerint dubito. nec tamen adfirmauerim nullam Germaniae uenam argentum aurumue gignere: quis enim scrutatus est? possessione et usu haud perinde adficiuntur.

Their families incentivise them to fight



Varus losing his legions (Otto Koch, 1909)

8 memoriae proditur quasdam acies inclinatas iam et labantes a feminis restitutas constantia precum et obiectu pectorum et monstrata comminus captiuitate, quam longe impatientius feminarum suarum nomine timent, adeo ut efficacius obligentur animi ciuitatum, quibus inter obsides puellae quoque nobiles imperantur. inesse quin etiam sanctum aliquid et prouidum putant, nec aut consilia earum asperrantur aut responsa neglegunt.

Divination by horses and by capturing and fighting one of the enemy, man to man

10 Though the Germans are also known to interpret the flight and calls of birds, their peculiar method is to consider the omens and premonitions arising from the behaviour of horses. Certain white ones are pastured at public expense amongst the woods and groves mentioned, and never harnessed for mundane human purposes; these they yoke to a sacred chariot bearing the priest, king or other chief of state, and they observe the horses' neighs and snorts. Not only the people, but their leaders, and priests place their greatest reliance on such divination; regarding themselves as servants, but the horses as messengers, of the gods.

They have one further method of divination, by which they foretell the outcome of major battles. A member of the tribe with whom they are at war is captured by one means or another, and pitted against a chosen champion of their own, each man wearing his tribe's armour. The victory of one or the other is taken as a presage of the wider result.

10 et illud quidem etiam hic notum, auium uoces uolatusque interrogare; proprium gentis equorum quoque praesagia ac monitus experiri. publice aluntur isdem nemoribus ac lucis, candidi et nullo mortali opere contacti; quos pressos sacro curru sacerdos ac rex uel princeps ciuitatis comitantur hinnitusque ac fremitus obseruant. nec ulli auspicio maior fides, non solum apud plebem, sed apud proceres, apud sacerdotes; se enim ministros deorum, illos conscios putant.

est et alia obseruatio auspicioꝝ, qua grauium bellorum euentus explorant. Eius gentis, cum qua bellum est, captiuum quoquo modo interceptum cum electo popularium suorum, patriis quemque armis, committunt: uictoria huius uel illius pro praeiudicio accipitur.

Status determined by number of youthful followers

13 This is status, this is power, to be always surrounded by a large select band of young men, an adornment in peace, a defence in war. It not only brings fame and glory to a warrior among his own people, that his retinue is known for its numbers and bravery, but also among neighbouring tribes; such men being requested as

ambassadors, honoured with gifts, and often their very name is enough to resolve conflict.

13 *haec dignitas, hae uires, magno semper et electorum iuuenum globo circumdari, in pace decus, in bello praesidium. nec solum in sua gente cuique, sed apud finitimas quoque ciuitates id nomen, ea gloria est, si numero ac uirtute comitatus emineat; expetuntur enim legationibus et muneribus ornantur et ipsa plerumque fama bella profligant.*

Leader and followers must match each other

14 Once engaged in battle, it is shameful for a chieftain to be outdone in courage, shameful for his followers not to match the bravery of their leader. To desert the field and survive one's prince indeed means a lifetime of reproach: to defend and protect him, to devote one's deeds to his greater glory, is recognised in their primary oath of allegiance: the leader fights for victory, the followers for their leader.

14 *cum uentum in aciem, turpe principi uirtute uinci, turpe comitatus uirtutem principis non adaequare. iam uero infame in omnem uitam ac probrosum superstitem principi suo ex acie recessisse. illum defendere, tueri, sua quoque fortia facta gloriae eius adsignare praecipuum sacramentum est. principes pro uictoria pugnant, comites pro principe.*

A tribe at peace will actively look for war, the basis of economic growth

14 If the tribe in which they are born is becalmed in a long period of peace and quiet, many noble youths, of their own will, seek tribes engaged in some war or other, because peace is unwelcome to their race, and it is easier to gain renown in troubled times. Moreover, a large retinue demands war and violence, since it is their prince's liberality that provides the mighty warhorse, the murderous all-conquering spear, the banquets and, though coarsely-wrought, the still lavish accoutrements that serve as their pay. The basis of such munificence is through war and rapine. You will find it harder to persuade them to till the land and await the harvest, than to challenge the enemy and earn their wounds. On the contrary, it seems weak and shiftless to them to acquire by sweat what you can win with blood.

14 *si ciuitas, in qua orti sunt, longa pace et otio torpeat, plerique nobilium adulescentium petunt ultro eas nationes, quae tum bellum aliquod gerunt, quia et ingrata genti quies et facilius inter ancipitia clarescunt magnumque comitatum non nisi ui belloque tueare; exigunt enim principis sui liberalitate illum bellatorem equum, illam cruentam uictricemque frameam. nam epulae et quamquam*

incompti, largi tamen apparatus pro stipendio cedunt. materia munificentiae per bella et raptus. nec arare terram aut expectare annum tam facile persuaseris quam uocare hostem et uulnera mereri. pigrum quin immo et iners uidetur sudore adquirere quod possis sanguine parare.

When not fighting, they hunt: women and the old do everything else



15 Whenever they are not engaged in war, they spend much time in hunting, more in idleness, given to food and sleep, the strongest and bravest warriors doing nothing, delegating the care of hearth and home, as well as the cultivation of their fields, to the women, the aged, and the most infirm of their household. They themselves vegetate, through that strange paradox of nature by which the same individuals both love idleness and loathe peace.

15 quotiens bella non ineunt, non multum uenatibus, plus per otium transigunt, dediti somno ciboque, fortissimus quisque ac bellicosissimus nihil agens, delegata domus et penatium et agrorum cura feminis senibusque et infirmissimo cuique ex familia; ipsi hebet, mira diuersitate naturae, cum idem homines sic ament inertiam et oderint quietem.

They are not urbanised

16 It is well known that none of the German tribes are urbanised, homes among them not being allowed in close proximity. They live apart, scattered, as fountain, field and grove appeal to them. Their villages are not built after our fashion with buildings near together and connected, rather each man surrounds his house with a

clear space, either as a precaution in case of fire, or through lack of expertise in construction. They use neither quarry-stones nor tiles, while the timber they employ for everything is uncarved, without ornament or decoration, though certain areas are coated carefully, and are bright and gleaming enough to substitute for paint and frescoes.

They also excavate subterranean pits, piling dirt on the roof, as a store and winter-shelter for produce, since such places mitigate the frost's rigour, and if enemies attack they will lay waste all above ground, but what is hidden below is either not known of, or escapes by its very nature, its discovery requiring a thorough search.

16 *nullas Germanorum populis urbes habitari satis notum est, ne pati quidem inter se iunctas sedes. Colunt discreti ac diuersi, ut fons, ut campus, ut nemus placuit. uicos locant non in nostrum morem conexas et cohaerentibus aedificiis: suam quisque domum spatio circumdat, siue aduersus casus ignis remedium siue inscitia aedificandi. ne caementorum quidem apud illos aut tegularum usus: materia ad omnia utuntur informi et citra speciem aut delectationem. quaedam loca diligentius inlinunt terra ita pura ac splendente, ut picturam ac lineamenta colorum imitetur.*

solent et subterraneos specus aperire eosque multo insuper fimo onerant, suffugium hiemis et receptaculum frugibus, quia rigorem frigorum eius modi loci molliunt, et si quando hostis aduenit, aperta populatur, abdita autem et defossa aut ignorantur aut eo ipso fallunt, quod quaerenda sunt.

Marriage to one wife is normal



A wife sees her husband off to battle (Johannes Gehrts, 1884)

18 However, the marriage laws are strictly observed among them, and you will find nothing more laudable in their customs. They, almost alone among barbarians, are

content with a single wife: the very few exceptions being embraced not out of libidinous desire, but to strengthen the nobility by multiple ties.

A dowry is not offered by the wife to the husband, but by the husband to the wife. The parents and relations gather round to approve the gifts, ones not designed to delight women or adorn the bride, but oxen, a horse and bridle, a shield, spear, or sword. The wife is received with these gifts, and she in turn offers some piece of weaponry to her husband. Thus marriage is sealed by an ultimate bond, a mysterious sacrament, by the gods themselves: lest the wife think herself absolved from considerations of bravery, and the fortunes of war,

18 quamquam seuera illic matrimonia, nec ullam morum partem magis laudaueris. nam prope soli barbarorum singulis uxoribus contenti sunt, exceptis admodum paucis, qui non libidine, sed ob nobilitatem plurimis nuptiis ambiuntur.

dotem non uxor marito, sed uxori maritus offert. intersunt parentes et propinqui ac munera probant, munera non ad delicias muliebres quaesita nec quibus noua nupta comatur, sed boues et frenatum equum et scutum cum framea gladioque. in haec munera uxor accipitur, atque in uicem ipsa armorum aliquid uiro adfert: hoc maximum uinculum, haec arcana sacra, hos coniugales deos arbitrantur. ne se mulier extra uirtutum cogitationes extraque bellorum casus putet, ipsi incipientis matrimonii auspiciis admonetur uenire se laborum periculisque sociam, idem in pace, idem in proelio passuram ausuramque.

Vice is almost unknown

19 So the women exist, fenced-in and chaste, without seductive display, uncorrupted by the incitements of the dinner-table. The exchange of secret letters is unknown to male or female. Adultery by a married woman is infrequent considering the size of population, and its punishment is swift, being the husband's prerogative: the husband drives her, her head shaved and her body stripped naked, from his house, in front of the relatives, and whips her through the village; there is no pardon for publicly acknowledged loss of chastity: neither beauty, youth nor wealth will find her a husband. No one laughs at vice there, no one calls corrupting or being corrupted 'modern life'.

19 ergo saepta pudicitia agunt, nullis spectaculorum inlecebris, nullis conuiuiorum irritationibus corruptae. litterarum secreta uiri pariter ac feminae ignorant. paucissima in tam numerosa gente adulteria, quorum poena praesens et maritis permissa: abscisis crinibus nudatam coram propinquis expellit domo maritus ac per omnem uicum uerbere agit; publicatae enim pudicitiae nulla uenia: non forma, non aetate, non opibus maritum inuenerit. nemo enim illic uitia ridet, nec corrumpere et corrumpi saeculum uocatur.



The simple tribal life (Arre Caballo)

Virginity is prized

19 Better still are the tribes where only virgins wed, and seal it once and for all with the vows and prayers of marriage. Thus they accept one husband only, so that, as one flesh and one being, without lingering thoughts or belated desires, they might love not simply the man, but marriage itself. To limit the number of their children, or do away with a later-born child is held as an abomination, while among them fine morals have more force than fine laws elsewhere.

19 melius quidem adhuc eae ciuitates, in quibus tantum uirgines nubunt et cum spe uotoque uxoris semel transigitur. sic unum accipiunt maritum quo modo unum corpus unamque uitam, ne ulla cogitatio ultra, ne longior cupiditas, ne tamquam maritum, sed tamquam matrimonium ament. numerum liberorum finire aut quemquam ex adgnatis necare flagitium habetur, plusque ibi boni mores ualent quam alibi bonae lege.

Lavish feasting and hospitality are the rule

21 No people indulge more lavishly in feasting and hospitality. It is a crime to close the door to any human being. Everyone offers a well-appointed table, according to their wealth. When the time comes, he who has been your host, points out your next port of call, and accompanies you. You go to a nearby house, without invitation

but that is no matter: you are received there with equal kindness. No one distinguishes between strangers or acquaintances where the laws of hospitality are concerned. It is usual to offer the parting guest anything he fancies: there is the same readiness to make requests in turn. They delight in the exchange of gifts, but neither take account of what they have given nor feel obliged to reciprocate what they have received. Manners between host and guest are always courteous.

21 conuictibus et hospitiis non alia gens effusius indulget. quemcumque mortalium arcere tecto nefas habetur; pro fortuna quisque apparatis epulis excipit. cum defecere, qui modo hospes fuerat, monstrator hospitii et comes; proximam domum non inuitati adeunt. nec interest: pari humanitate accipiuntur. notum ignotumque quantum ad ius hospitis nemo discernit. abeunti, si quid poposcerit, concedere moris; et poscendi in uicem eadem facilitas. gaudent muneribus, sed nec data imputant nec acceptis obligantur: uictus inter hospites comis.

Days and nights are spent drinking



Same difference ...

22 Waking from sleep, which they usually extend into the daylight hours, they wash, generally in warm water, since winter dominates so much of their lives. Having washed, they take food: each seated apart at their own table. Then to business, or as often to enjoyment, weapon in hand. It is no reproach to spend day and night drinking. Quarrels are frequent, as usual among the inebriated, seldom ended merely with invective, more often with bloodshed and wounds.

22 statim e somno, quem plerumque in diem extrahunt, lauantur, saepius calida, ut apud quos plurimum hiems occupat. lautum cibum capiunt: separatae singulis sedes et sua cuique mensa. tum ad negotia nec minus saepe ad conuiuia procedunt armati. diem noctemque continuare potando nulli probrum. crebrae, ut inter uinolentos, rixae raro conuiciis, saepius caede et uulneribus transiguntur.

Guileless, at banquets they take all their decisions, revisiting them next day

22 Yet reconciliation between enemies, the forming of family alliances, the appointment of leaders, even questions of peace or war, are commonly debated at these banquets, as though at no time are their minds more open to honest thought or more greatly inspired. A race without cunning or guile, in the liberty such gatherings allow they expose things previously hidden in the heart; so every thought is laid bare. The next day all is reviewed, and its rightness on each occasion justified: they deliberate when incapable of pretence, and decide when free from illusions.

22 sed et de reconciliandis in uicem inimicis et iungendis adfinitatibus et adsciscendis principibus, de pace denique ac bello plerumque in conuiuuiis consultant, tamquam nullo magis tempore aut ad simplices cogitationes pateat animus aut ad magnas incalescat. gens non astuta nec callida aperit adhuc secreta pectoris licentia ioci; ergo detecta et nuda omnium mens. postera die retractatur, et salua utriusque temporis ratio est: deliberant, dum fingere nesciunt, constituunt, dum errare non possunt.

Next week: Tacitus' *Dialogus*