

# Germania

By: Sean Geddie (MdMMM)

While traveling through the German provinces in the early years of the first century, the Roman historian and orator Cornelius Tacitus wrote the most detailed account of the early Germanic tribes known in the modern world. The book was called *Germania*, and it was published in about the year 98. Translated in the year 1877 by A. J. Church and W. J. Brodribb, and later in the year 1910 by Thomas Gordon, it explores the many tribes of peoples that make up the nation of Germany. “No one in Germany laughs at vice, nor do they call it the fashion to corrupt and to be corrupted,” (Church, Brodribb, paragraph 18).

*Germania* is a description of the country itself, the origins of the people there, and their physical description. Tacitus also describes the various military practices like, ratio of cavalry to infantry, and what weapons they like to use. He discusses the numerous legal laws concerning marriage, succession of children, division of property, and fines for homicide, as well as the usual food, dress, sports, and preoccupation for gambling and drinking of the Germanic people. The way their towns are arranged in accordance to their farming methods is also touched upon. Tacitus closes with a small section on funeral rites. *Beowulf* was composed nearly six hundred fifty two years after *Germania*, however some of the traits that Tacitus describes of the early Germanic tribes are also described in *Beowulf*. These traits include the Germans value of precious metals, what constitutes a good king, the influence of women in society, worship of deities, the influence of war on government, fines for murder, and funeral rites. However, being mostly a tale of war, *Beowulf* does not touch on many of the topics that Tacitus speaks about.

Tacitus begins by defining the boundaries of the German nation. It is flanked by Gaul, Rhoetia, and Pannonia, separated by the rivers Rhine and Danube. It is separated from the nations Sarmatia and Dacia by either feud or by mountains. The rest of the German nation is surrounded by ocean (Church, Brodribb, paragraph 1). *Beowulf* does not give a clear description of the geography in which the story takes place, other than the fact that the land of the Geats was separated from the land of the Scyldings by a sea, flavorfully described as a “swan’s road,” (*Beowulf* p.6).

*Germania* explains that the name “German” was not the original name of the nation of tribes occupying the area he is describing. This name came from a tribe who crossed over the Rhine and drove out the Gauls. The same tribe had employed the name “German” to strike fear into the hearts of the other tribes. Gradually, the other tribes had adopted this name along with their own, thus becoming Germans themselves. The German tribe had since changed its name to the Tungrians (Church, Brodribb, paragraph 2). In *Beowulf*, the names of the tribes were often influenced by the name of their founder. For example: the founder of the Scyldings was named Scyld Scefing (*Beowulf* p.3).

The earlier German people are characterized as being more or less the same with blue eyes, yellow or red hair, and large body frames. The translations of Tacitus state that the German people, while having large bodies, are only rigorous for a short time and that they either do not like or can not handle the labors of hard work. Because of the climate they live in, the people are not acclimated to heat and thirst, but to hunger and cold. To these characteristics, Tacitus relates the general consensus of the German population (Church, Brodribb, paragraph 3; Gordon, paragraph 3). However, the narrative of *Beowulf* doesn’t really give an accurate physical description of any of the people. Rather it describes what armaments they are carrying, suggesting the characters’ wealth and political status. It also describes them through their deeds in the past and their influences upon society (*Beowulf* pp.8 & 13).

The aforementioned climate and structure of the German landscape is filled with swampy mires on the west towards Gaul and more mountainous on the east towards Noricum and Pannonia. The soil is more suited to the growth of grain than of fruit trees. Their main source of food is herds of animals, however small. Herds of oxen, in particular are prized commodities. Precious metals such as gold and silver are not found in abundance within the central tribes, but there is no way to tell if there has been search of any. For those

central tribes do not value such things as the vessels made of precious metals more than vessels made of earth. The tribes that border the Roman Empire, however, have learned to value precious metals for commerce and trade. They have even preference for certain coins, mostly silver, for silver is more convenient to purchase many inexpensive wares than gold is (Church, Brodribb, paragraph 4-5).

Beowulf shows the Germanic tribes' evolution of economy in the way that the peoples value gold, precious metals, and treasure more so than in Tacitus' account of the previous tribes. Treasures are given freely from one's king to his thanes, or won by blood and war. The warriors' shields and helmets are adorned with gold decorations. There is even a passage that states, "Easily may treasure, gold in the ground, betray each one of the race of men, hide it who will," (Beowulf p.46). This reflects not only the peoples' value of treasure, but also the realization of the strife of war, bloodshed, etc. that comes with it (Beowulf pp. 20 & 46).

It is obvious from the weapons that the earlier Germans use that iron is not used often, either. The weapon most common is the javelin, or short spear, usually tipped with an iron spearhead. These short spears they call "framms," (Gordon, paragraph 6). With the framms the Germans can fight equally effectively in close-range combat and at a distance, for the framms can easily be thrown a great distance. Each soldier is equipped with several framms and/or a shield, even the horsemen. Their armor is likewise sparse and simple, with the average foot-soldier either naked, or clothed in only a cloak. The use of helmets and chain mail shirts are a rarity. The only exception of this tendency towards sparse, undecorated arms and armor is that the shields are displayed with a few, distinct colors, (Church, Brodribb, paragraph 5). Beowulf's initial band bears similar arms of mail shirts, shields, and wooden spears. However, their helmets were decorated with golden images of boars and not devoid of decoration. This shows the cultures' evolving value of commodities and personal display from the time of Tacitus (Beowulf pp.8-9).

The earlier Germans' use of horses also follows a simplistic pattern in the way that the horses are taught only to move forward or turn to face the rear. This is done in such a way as to form a single line of horseman on the battlefield. The main power of their armies is the foot soldiers, which are intermixed with the horsemen. These soldiers form a wedge-shaped formation in the front line as a commonly used tactic. Running from battle without returning is called cowardice and is a crime punishable by banishment from sacred rituals (Church, Brodribb, paragraph 6). Although Beowulf does not go into detail about any of the large-scale battles, there is a passage that describes the importance placed upon the foot-soldiers. It reads, "Then was a horse bridled for Hrothgar, a curly-maned mount. The wise king moved in state; the band of shield-bearers marched on foot," this passage symbolizes the swiftness and power of the infantry, the major portion of the Germanic armies (p.25).

The kings of the Germanic tribes are described by Tacitus as being selected from noble bloodlines. Their power over their tribe is real and unrestricted; however the power of corporeal punishment is reserved for administration by the priests only. The tribes select their generals based on their fearlessness and prowess in battle. These generals are expected to lead by example in battle (Church, Brodribb, paragraph 7). The kingship of Beowulf was said to be handed down from father to son, unless the act of war prevented this. The fabled Beowulf, the son of Scyld, was described as being a good king by, "...giving splendid gifts while still in his father's house, to make sure that later in life beloved companions will stand by him, that people will serve him when war comes," (Beowulf p.3). A bad king that was described was Heremod, who hoarded his treasure away from his people, (p.30).

However the most powerful incentive to fight well, Tacitus states, is not their generals or kings, but in his kinsmen that he fights beside, and the family members that bring food and aid to the battlefield. Tacitus accounts stories of entire wars that have been won only by women who shouted and exposed their breasts. These women were showing what would happen to them should they lose the battle, for the women would be taken as slaves. Their women they respect and admire so much that a few tribes have even deified female leaders, or worshipped female deities (Church, Brodribb, paragraph 8). Beowulf describes Wealhtheow, Hrothgar's wife and queen of the Scyldings, as "mindful of customs," and "beloved of the people," (p.12). Later in the book, she gives Beowulf treasures as a leader of her tribe (p.22). When Beowulf dies at the end, a Geatish woman sings about the war and captivity of the Geats, foretelling the future of her people after their king's death (p.52).

The most commonly worshipped deity is Mercury, as well as Mars, but there is a small worship of the Goddess Isis. They worship these and other deities by sacrificing animals and sometimes people. Other times they consecrate whole groves and woods to certain deities, preferring not to confine them in concrete forms (Church, Brodrribb, paragraph 9). The narrative of Beowulf was written from a Christian point of view, but it states that in an attempt to rid their country of Grendel, the Scyldings "vowed sacrifices at heathen temples," showing the people's pagan tendencies. This is the only mention of worship to anything other than the Christian god (p.6).

For divining and making small decisions, Tacitus states that the German peoples like to throw lots marked with special characters. These are said to report the will and favor of mystical forces (Church, Brodrribb, paragraph 10). Beowulf makes no particular mention of lots or characters, but on page seven the Geatish people "examined the omens" of Beowulf's mission to go to Hrothgar. For problems that face the tribe as a whole, Tacitus claims the people form councils. These often take several days to assemble and to deliberate the time and place. The people gather in a crowd and come armed. It is up to the priests to regulate them and promote peace. The highest in rank, usually a king speaks first, followed by the others down the line of authority (Church, Brodrribb, paragraph 10). Beowulf also makes mention of nobles spending time in council, but gives no details (p.6).

Germania states that in such councils, accusations are made and punishments given. For crimes considered great, the punishment of execution is reserved, however the method is often varied. For lesser crimes, there are fines of varied commodities. In addition to crimes, leaders are also chosen at council gatherings, as well as one hundred people to support each one in their new position of power (Church, Brodrribb, paragraph 11). In Beowulf, the Scyldings knew that they would gain no compensation from Grendel, "...no counselor there had any reason to expect splendid repayment at the hands of the slayer," (p.6).

Support of one's chief in battle is paramount, and a member of the tribe must fight to the death under his rule. Glory in war is esteemed so highly that if a particular tribe were to be in a prolonged state of peace, the young warriors would often leave to find other tribes already in war in order to gain renown through battle. Many tribes major source of income are spoils of war and "think it tame and stupid to acquire by the sweat of toil what they might win by their blood," (Church, Brodrribb, paragraphs 12-13). The narrative of Beowulf describes the influence of war on their culture and society many times. On page twenty-three, it tells of the tribes' readiness to go into battle at all times. The narrative also describes the value of a glorious death in battle, rather than to die haven't done any brave deeds (p.25 & 48).

Tacitus describes the towns of the tribes that settle are arranged with every house spread apart from the rest, and not connected. They do not use stone or tile, rather all the buildings are made of wood. In addition to their homes, the Germans also dig out great pits in the ground to store their grain or hide from the cold. These they also hide in if their town is ever attacked, because the underground rooms are often overlooked (Church, Brodrribb, paragraph 15).

The earlier Germans who live in poverty dress themselves very sparsely, often covered in nothing but a cloak fastened with a clasp or a thorn. The more wealthy men dress in tight-fitting clothes, and in the skins of animals. The women wear clothes like those of the men, except dressed in linen. These they embroider with purple decorations. They have no sleeves, and the tops of their breasts are exposed (Church, Brodrribb, paragraph 16).

Tacitus praises the laws governing marriage as the most praiseworthy trait of the German people, for theirs is the only "barbarian" law that prohibits polygamy. The husband presents the dowry to the wife, "gifts not meant to suit a woman's taste, nor such as a bride would deck herself with, but oxen, a caparisoned steed, a shield, a lance, and a sword," (Church, Brodrribb, paragraph 17). The wife also brings gifts of arms and armor, to symbolize that she will join with her husband even though she does so through peril of war. These gifts are passed down to her sons and from them to their wives and so forth (Church, Brodrribb, paragraph 17).

Adultery is reported to be a rare crime in the German nation, and the punishment harsh. The woman has her hair cut off, and then she is stripped naked and paraded through the town while being whipped by her husband. To limit the amount of children, or to kill any of them is also prohibited, but more through social codes of conduct than any legal one (Church, Brodribb, paragraph 18).

All the children are raised the same way free and enslaved alike. The mothers breastfeed the young and do not rely on the aid of nurses. The free are only distinguished from the enslaved when they come of age. The men marry late, so as to preserve their youthful strength for war. The women are likewise married late for it is often that married couples are of the same age and stature so as to “reproduce the strength of the parents,” (Church, Brodribb, paragraph 19). The property of the parents, upon death is distributed amongst all his children and the children’s uncles on both sides. Along with possessions, the children must also adopt the feuds and friendships of his family. However, feuds can be settled by the giving of livestock (Church, Brodribb, paragraph 19-20).

Tacitus also prizes the Germans’ hospitality as something to be aspired. A person receives anyone who comes to their house, regardless of whether they are an acquaintance or a complete stranger. The host gives all that he is required to and nothing is spared. If the host exhausts his home, then he travels with the stranger to the next house, to be received by those who live there (Church, Brodribb, paragraph 21-22). This hospitality is shown by Hrothgar when Beowulf and his men are accepted into the kingdom of the Scyldings with feasts and celebrations (pp.11-13).

Germania describes that during a normal day in peace-time for a German; they rise out of bed late into the day, take a bath, and then eat a meal of meat. Nothing they do, they do without their armaments, and it is not unusual to go an entire day and night drinking. At feasts they reconcile the differences with their neighbors and kinsmen, while discussing peace and war. These feasts are often abundant with food and drink, and often the only payment the chief rewards to his kinsmen (Church, Brodribb, paragraph 23). In the time of Beowulf, the kings’ warriors are rewarded with treasures looted from the bodies of their enemies as well as food and drink from their land (p.35).

The German’s drink is fermented from barely or other grains into a beer. Their food consists of wild fruit, venison, and milk, which they consume without ritual. Another festivity aside from feasting is a game in which young men dance naked while swords and spears are being thrust at him. Gambling, they also enjoy, and will regularly stake one’s own freedom in order to win a bet. The loser is then bound and sold, but often parted with by commerce. Tacitus looks down upon this, calling it their “stubborn persistency in a bad practice,” (Church, Brodribb, paragraph 25).

When Scyld Scefing died, his people put him in a ship filled with treasure, mail shirts and swords. Then the ship was sailed out to sea, without anyone who could tell where it was to go, just as he arrived as a child. The warriors that died in the battle at Finnsburg were all placed on a pyre, along with their arms, armor, and treasure from the gold hoard. After Beowulf is burned on his funeral pyre, his ashes are buried under a giant mound called a “barrow,” (pp.3, 20-21, & 47). These barrows are mentioned by Tacitus, in a brief passage in Germania as well (Church, Brodribb, paragraph 27).

The swift-footed, proud Germans that respected women described by Tacitus share many of the traits of the battle ready, proud tribes described in Beowulf. The main difference between the two time periods would be an increase in the use and value of metals. In Beowulf there is more mention of swords, while still iron, being used in warfare, as well as gold ornamentation and jewelry. The law of compensation from a murderer, the willingness to battle, and the rest are sufficient evidence to support that the two peoples, while separated by time and space, are of the same blood.