

Tacitus, *Germany* 1-10

Source: A. Birley, *Tacitus: Agricola and Germany* (Oxford: OUP, 1999).

1. Germany as a whole is separated from the Gauls, Raetians, and Pannonians by the Rhine and Danube rivers, from the Sarmatians and Dacians by mutual fear or by mountains. The Ocean, embracing wide peninsulas and islands, measureless expanses, flows round the remainder. It is only recently that certain peoples and kings have become known: war has opened them up. The Rhine rises in a remote and precipitous peak of the Raetian Alps and then turns slightly westward to flow into the northern Ocean. The Danube, issuing from a gentle and gradually rising slope of Mount Abnoba [the Black Forest], passes more peoples in its course, until it breaks out into the Pontic [Black] Sea through six channels; a seventh is lost in the marshes.

2. The Germans themselves are the original inhabitants of the country, so I incline to believe, and have very little foreign blood from admixture through invasions by other peoples or through friendly dealings with them. For in former times those who sought new homes travelled not by land but on ship, and the Ocean, which stretches beyond them without limit and so to speak lies on the other side, is seldom visited by ships from our world. In any case, apart from the danger of the wild and unknown sea, who would have left Asia, Africa, or Italy to make for Germany, with its unattractive landscape and raw climate, harsh to cultivate or even to look at—unless it were his home country?

In the ancient songs, which are their only form of record and are a kind of chronicle, they celebrate Tuisto, an earth-born god. To him they attribute a son, Mannus, the forefather and founder of their people, and to Mannus three sons, after whom were named the Ingvaeones, nearest to the Ocean, the Herminones in the interior, and the remainder Istvaeones. Remote antiquity gives free range to conjecture: some assert that the god had further offspring and that there are further peoples, called Marsi, Gambrivii, Suebi, and Vandili, and that these are the genuine and ancient names. Further, the name 'Germania' is said to be a new and recent application: it was because the ones who first crossed the Rhine and expelled the Gauls, and are now called Tungri, were called Germani at that time. Thus, it is said, what was the name of a people, not of the whole nation, gradually acquired a wider usage: the conqueror, through fear, applied it to them all, and in due course, once they had got to know the name, they all called themselves Germani.

3. It is said that Hercules visited them as well. In fact they sing of him as the foremost of all heroes when about to go into battle. Further, they too have those songs, which they call *baritus*, the recital of which stirs up their courage, and they forecast the outcome of the coming battle from the chanting alone. For they either terrify the enemy or become frightened themselves according to how it sounds in the ranks. What they listen to is not so much the words, but rather the sound of unison as an expression of fighting spirit. By putting their shields in front of their mouths so that their voices swell fuller and deeper as they echo back, they aim principally to achieve a harsh tone and a muffled roaring noise. At all events, some believe that Ulysses, in those long and legendary wanderings of his, also sailed to this part of the Ocean and visited the lands of Germany, and that Asciburgium, situated on the bank of the Rhine and inhabited to this day, was founded by him and named *Askipurgion*. At any rate, an altar dedicated by Ulysses, also inscribed with the name of his father Laertes, is supposed to have been found at this same place long ago; and monuments and funerary barrows with inscriptions in Greek lettering are said still to

exist on the borders of Germany and Raetia. It is not my intention either to argue in support of, or to refute, these assertions: according to their own inclination, each may either disbelieve or accept them.

4. I myself accept the view of those who judge that the peoples of Germany have never been contaminated by intermarriage with other nations and that the race remains unique, pure, and unlike any other. As a result, their physical appearance too, if one may generalize about so large a population, is always the same: fierce blue eyes, red hair, and large bodies. Their bodies, however, are strong only for a violent outburst. These same large frames cannot last out for work and effort, and can scarcely tolerate thirst or heat, although their climate has made them accustomed to cold and their poor soil to hunger.

5. The land may vary a certain amount in its appearance, but in general it either bristles with forests or festers with marshes. It is wetter on the side facing the Gauls, windier opposite Noricum and Pannonia. It is fertile for sown crops but will not grow fruit-trees. It is rich in livestock, but these are mostly undersized. Even on their foreheads the cattle lack their proper distinction and glory. The people take pride in their quantity, for cattle are their sole, greatly prized wealth.

Silver and gold have been denied them by the gods, whether as a sign of favour or of anger I cannot say. Yet I would not claim that no veins of silver and gold exist in Germany. After all, who has searched for them? They lack the necessary interest in their possession or use. One can see among them silver vessels given as presents to their envoys or chiefs which are put to the same use as earthenware ones. All the same, those who live nearest to us recognize the value of gold and silver for trade, and know and pick out particular types among our coinage. The peoples of the interior, being simpler and more old-fashioned, use barter. They approve of the old and long-familiar coins, the ones with notched

edges or stamped with two-horse chariots. They also prefer silver to gold, not because of any special liking for it, but because the value of silver money is more convenient for buying cheap everyday goods.

6. Even iron is not plentiful, as is inferred from the way they are armed. Only a few use swords or large lances. They carry spears, or as they call them in their own language, *frameae*, with a short and narrow iron point, which are, however, so sharp and easy to handle that they fight with the same weapon at close quarters or long range, as required. Even their horsemen are content with just shield and spear. The infantry also hurl javelins, of which each man has several, and they throw them a vast distance. They are either naked or lightly clad in short cloaks. Their weapons have no ostentatious decoration—only the shields are marked out in very bright colours. A few have a breastplate, one or two at most a metal helmet or leather cap. Their horses are remarkable neither for beauty nor for speed and are not trained, as ours are, to execute various turns. They ride them straight ahead or with just a single wheel to the right, keeping their line together in such a way that no one falls behind.

Generally speaking, their strength lies more in their infantry. That is why they fight in mixed formations. The speed of the foot soldiers, picked out of the whole body of young men and placed in the front of the battle-line, is such that they can easily keep up with a cavalry encounter. The number of these picked men is also fixed: there are one hundred from each district, and that is exactly what they are called among their own people—thus what was originally just a number has now become a name of distinction as well. The battle-line is made up of wedges. To give ground, providing that you return to the attack, is considered prudent rather than cowardly. They recover the bodies of their own fallen even in unsuccessful battles. To leave one's shield behind is the supreme disgrace, and the dishonoured loses the right to attend religious ceremonies or to enter the assembly. Many such survivors

from the wars have put an end to their shame by hanging themselves.

7. Their kings they choose for their noble birth, their army commanders for their valour. Even the kings do not have absolute or unrestricted power, and their commanders lead by example rather than by issuing orders, gaining respect if they are energetic, if they stand out, if they are at the front of the line. Executions, imprisonment, even floggings, are allowed to no one other than the priests, and are not carried out as a punishment or on the orders of the commander, but as it were at the behest of the deity whom they believe to be present as they wage war. They actually bring with them into battle certain images and symbols taken from the sacred groves.

It is a particular incitement to valour that their squadrons and wedges are not formed at random or by chance mustering but are composed of families and kinship groups. They have their nearest and dearest close by, as well, so that they can hear the shrieks of their women and the crying of their children. For each man these are the most sacred witnesses, their praise is the most highly valued. It is to their mothers and their wives, who do not shrink from counting and examining their cuts, that they go with their wounds. They also bring food and words of encouragement to the men as they fight. 8. It is recorded that some armies that were already wavering and on the point of collapse have been rallied by women pleading steadfastly, blocking their path with bared breasts, and reminding their men how near they themselves are to being taken captive. This they fear by a long way more desperately for their women than for themselves. Indeed, peoples who are ordered to include girls of noble family among their hostages are thereby placed under a more effective restraint. They even believe that there is something holy and an element of the prophetic in women, hence they neither scorn their advice nor ignore their predictions. Under the Deified Vespasian we witnessed how Valeda was long regarded by many of them as a divine being; and in former times, too, they revered Albruna and a number of other women, not through servile flattery nor as if they had to make goddesses out of them.

9. Among the gods Mercury is the one they principally worship. They regard it as a religious duty to offer to him, on fixed days, human as well as other sacrificial victims. Hercules and Mars they appease by animal offerings of the permitted kind. Part of the Suebi sacrifice to Isis as well. I have little idea what the origin or explanation of this foreign cult is, except that the goddess's emblem, which resembles a light warship, indicates that the cult came in from abroad. In general, they judge it not to be in keeping with the majesty of heavenly beings to confine them within walls or to portray them in any human likeness. They consecrate woods and groves and they apply the names of gods to that mysterious presence which they see only with the eye of devotion.

10. They attach the highest importance to the taking of auspices and the casting of lots. Their usual procedure with the lot is simple. They cut off a branch from a nut-bearing tree and slice it into strips. These they mark with different signs and throw them at random onto a white cloth. Then the state's priest, if it is an official consultation, or the father of the family, in a private one, offers prayer to the gods and looking up towards heaven picks up three strips, one at a time, and, according to which sign they have previously been marked with, makes his interpretation. If the lots forbid an undertaking, there is no deliberation that day about the matter in question. If they allow it, further confirmation is required by taking the auspices. The widespread practice of seeking an answer from the call or flight of birds is, to be sure, known here too, but it is a speciality of this people to test horses as well for omens and warnings. The horses are maintained at public expense in the above-mentioned sacred woods and groves; they are pure white and undefiled by any kind of work for humans. They are yoked to a sacred chariot and the priest or king or chief of the state walks beside them, taking note of their whinnies and neighing. No kind of omen inspires greater confidence, not only among the common people but even among the nobles and priests, who regard themselves as but the servants of the gods, the horses as the gods' messengers. There is yet another kind of auspice-taking, used to

forecast the outcome of serious wars. They somehow take prisoner a man from the state with which they are at war and set him to fight a champion from their own side, each armed with his national weapons. The victory of one or the other is taken as determining the result in advance.