

Johann Heinrich Zedler, “Germany’s Borders” (1745)

Abstract

“When describing the borders of Germany, one must carefully distinguish between historical eras, for this land did not have a constant, consistent boundary.” So begins an article on “Germany’s Borders” in Johann Heinrich Zedler’s *Grosses vollständiges Universal-Lexicon Aller Wissenschaften und Künste* [*Large, Comprehensive, Universal Lexicon of All Sciences and Arts*], the leading German-language encyclopedia of the eighteenth century. Zedler aimed to convey the entirety of contemporary knowledge and science and to make it widely available; at the same time, he endeavored to present knowledge in a certain order. The article on the Germany’s borders refers to the Roman writer Tacitus (ca. 58–120) and describes the “natural” borders of Germany, including rivers (Rhine and Danube), seas (the German Sea), and mountains (Germanic mountains).

Source

Germany’s Borders

When describing the borders of Germany, one must carefully distinguish between historical eras, for this land did not have a constant, consistent boundary. The borders of Germany in antiquity were entirely different than those of today. Weinrich in *diff. de fin. Germ.* In the first phases, the German borders were fixed: the Rhine, the ocean, the Danube, and the Black Sea. The Rhine was the limit to the west, as all the sources agree. Tacitus *de mor. Germ.* c. 1. Solinus c. 23. Pomp. Mela L. 3. c. 3. Eginhard c. 15. Cluver in *Germ. antiqv. d. l.* c. 12. Jrenic. *Exeg. Hist. Germ.* L. I. c. 14. Pontanus in *Orig. Franc. L. I.* c. 1. 2. Caesar *de B. G. L. I.* c. 2. und L. IV. c. 15. To the south, Germany was defined by the Danube, which separated it from Vindelicia and Noricum. Ptolomaeus c. 1. Strabo l. c. To the east, it had the Vistula. Mela L. III. c. 4. Jornandes *de reb. Ger.* c. 5. Plinius in *Hist. nat. L. IV.* c. 27. To the north it bordered the open sea. As one can see, Germany extended then much further to the east and north than it does at present. In Tacitus’s day, Germany’s borders were the Rhine, the Danube, the German Sea, and the Sarmatian mountains, which divided this empire from Sarmatia, which itself reached to the east over the Vistula. To the west and the south, however, it was more restricted. These boundaries are nearly the same as what one finds during the great era of the Emperor Charles [V]. After the Germans crossed the Rhine, however, and Germany had become a special empire under Charles’s grandson Louis [II] the German, who received a strip of land on the other side of the Rhine and the Danube, its borders were expanded on these sides considerably, for they annexed other places. From this time on, the Rhine was no longer the western boundary of Germany, but rather it expanded on account of the wine [regions] over the currents of the Rhine. Regino *ad a. 842.* Sigebert *Gemblacensis a. 844.* Lehmann *Chron. Spir. I.* 3. c. 40. So it came about that areas on the other side of the Rhine, which are also called Gallia Belgica, were considered part of Germany. After Lothair’s death, a piece of Lorraine, which Louis the German and Charles the Bald shared equally, fell to Germany. Louis the Stammerer, however, ceded it in the end to Louis the Younger, which Henry the Fowler later brought to Germany via treaties reached with the French king Charles in Bonn. *Conring de fin. imp. L. I.* c. 6. Synt, I. P. cap. 3 § 21. To the south, the borders were expanded, as well, when Vindelicia and Noricum, and then also Hungary, were incorporated to include the Leitha and Mur. Otto *Frisingensis L. I.* cap. 31. The only restriction was to the east, where they were limited by the Oder, on the other side of which the Slavs lived. Ditmarus L. IV. p. 350. During the reign of Frederick I [of Prussia], however, these [people], too, came under Germany[’s dominion]. Saro *Grammat. Hist. Dan. L. XVII.* p. 375. *Conring l.c. An.*

Fuldenses ad ann. 811. Adam Bremensis L. I. c. II. To the north, the Elde River was set as the German border. Wittichind L. I. p. 637. Helmold L. II. c. 15. Today Germany borders France, Upper Burgundy, Lorraine, and the United Netherlands to the west; the North Sea, Schleswig, and the Baltic to the north; Prussia, Poland, Hungary, and Slavonia to the east; and, finally, the Adriatic Sea, Italy, and Switzerland to the south. The distance from north to south—from the Baltic to Italy—is calculated to be 151 German miles,^[1] and the breadth from France to Poland equals 200 German miles. According to Jacob Schopper, Germany's shape is nearly circular, so that neither the height nor the width exceeds the other by thirty miles. According to his calculations, the circumference totals 465 German miles, namely the distance from the city of Bruges in Flanders to Pressburg [Bratislava] in Hungary through Brussels, Trier, Heidelberg, Regensburg, and Vienna, or 148 German miles between Bruges and Marienburg [Malbork] in Prussia, through Antwerp, Cologne, and Magdeburg. The width, he writes, was taken from Sion in Valais, along a straight line to Lübeck, through Basel, Mainz, Marburg, Braunschweig, and Lüneburg, and equals 120 [German] miles. Parchenius litigiofus writes [L. I. c. 16. n. 7.] that in its length Germany is about 86,000 paces from the west, or Bologna, to the Vistula in the east. If you then calculate that there are four thousand paces in a German mile, it suggests a length of 171.5 [German] miles. In this manner, this almost agrees with Sansorius, who writes [L. II. del governo di diversi Regni p. 21] that Germany's width from east to west [totals] 840 [Italian miles] and in the distance from the south, or from the Venetian territories and the Italian mountains, to the German Sea, i.e., to the north, 745 Italian miles. In German miles this equals—calculating five Italian miles to a German mile—168 in the width [east-west] and 149 in the breadth [north-south]. The *Thesaurus Politicus*, which was printed in Milan, gives a circumference of 2,600 Italian, or 520 German miles. Adelarius Erichius, however, gives only 460, and Dresserus [P. V. *Hagog Histor.*] only 465 miles as the total circumference of Germany. Just as the borders of Germany were not always the same in antiquity and more recent times, one must pay attention to the divisions of Germany during the various phases of history. [. . .]

NOTES

[1] Up until the nineteenth century, Germans used the unit “German mile,” which equals 7532.5 meters, or almost 4.7 modern American miles—trans.

Source: Johann Heinrich Zedler, “Grentzen Teutschlands,” in *Grosses vollständiges Universal-Lexicon Aller Wissenschaften und Künste*, vol. 43 (1745). Halle/Leipzig: Johann Heinrich Zedler, 1732–1754, pp. 273–75. Available online at: <https://www.zedler-lexikon.de/>

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