The "Germania" of Tacitus as received by German Humanists: Johann Eberlin von Günzburg, *Ein zamengelesen buochlin von der teutschen Nation* [*A Collected Booklet about the German Nation*](1526)

Abstract

The Roman author Tacitus (c. 58–120 AD) wrote "Germania," a study of the ancient Germanic tribes, to convince the Roman elites that the Germans needed to be defeated and subjugated before they could pose a threat to the Roman Empire. Centuries later, sixteenth-century German humanists read Tacitus somewhat differently. In their eyes, his text presented the basis for a founding myth of the Germans. Johann Eberlin von Günzburg (c. 1470–1533) was a Lutheran preacher and author of Reformation pamphlets. He was the first person to attempt a translation of Tacitus' Latin text into German. Günzburg's German translation never appeared in print, however. In the excerpt below, Tacitus' writing is presented to German readers as a glimpse into a national past, albeit one constructed after the fact.

Source

[Introduction]

It is quite a shame that a German man should know and consider so little about his nation; thus, each and every one should go to considerable lengths to reveal this noble nation's beginnings, development, handlings, and coincidental damages, also its defenses, as instruction and a warning to others.

[…]

The Germans cannot tolerate heat and thirst well, but they are quite impervious to cold and hunger. Their land consists of forests and swamps; it is rainier on the side towards Gaul and windier on the side facing Noricum and Pannonia. [Noricum is the land between the Danube and Bohemia, from the foot of it to Hungary and Austria.][1] The land is fertile enough, though fruit trees do not flourish, and it is good grazing country, but the cattle are usually stunted. It is these herds which they have in abundance, their cattle being more plentiful than beautiful.

Iron is not plentiful among them, either, as may be inferred from the nature of their weapons. Swords or broad lances are seldom used; but they generally carry a spear (called in their language *framea*) [perhaps this refers to the barb near the blade of their dagger], which has a blade that is short and uses little iron but with a sharp point and manageable enough to be employed either in close or distant fighting, as occasion requires. This spear and a shield are all the armor the cavalry has. The footmen also have darts, several to each man, which they throw. They are either naked, or lightly covered with a short mantle. Their clothes are not fancy, but they do paint their shields colorfully. Few possess a breastplate, and only a man or two here and there has a helmet or headpiece.

Their horses are remarkable neither for their beauty nor swiftness, nor are they taught the various patterns we

practice with ours. They ride in one large pack and circle up so that none is left behind the rest. They believe that the footmen can put up a better fight; as a result, they mix cavalry with the infantry. They choose the footmen from the best youth and send them to the frontline. The number of footmen, too, is fixed; a hundred from each village are summoned: and those, in turn, who are chosen from among them consider it an honor. [They built their houses along creeks, along each creek there were a hundred. And all the houses that were along a particular creek were considered a village.] Their battle formation is to have a few men in the very front create a point that gets wider and wider towards the back. To retreat, provided one charges again, is considered a prudent tactic rather than cowardice. They carry off the corpses even when the battle is dangerous. The worst, most disgraceful thing that can happen is to lose one's shield. Those who have done so are not permitted to join in their religious rites or any other assemblies; many have been known hang themselves on account of this shame.

They choose their kings for their noble birth, but their princes[2] are selected based on their strength and worthy deeds. The king's power is not limitless, and the princes seek to exert control with valiant deeds rather than with commands, believing that if they stand nobly in the frontline and fight skillfully, they shall be highly regarded. Only the priests are authorized to punish, bind, or strike at wrongdoers, and they do not do this at the princes' bidding or as a kind of mortal punishment, but only at the express command of the deity whom they believe stands by them in war; and they carry with them into battle certain images and symbols from their sacred groves.

The greatest motivator of their strength is that the members of the military units are not arranged by chance [They do not run together with no sense of formation like sheep!], but men of one family and one kin stay together, followed by their sons, so that they can hear the wailing of their women and children, who witness everything, and praise and applaud the best. When they come home,[3] they show their mothers and wives their wounds; they count the wounds, and when the sons and men do not know show them [the wounds] themselves, the wives and mothers demand it of them. The mothers and wives carry food and admonitions to the soldiers.

One reads, as well, that often, when a German line was wavering on the point of giving way, the women rallied it, urgently entreating the men to fight on, baring their breasts and crying out that their captivity was at hand. For the Germans are especially averse to the thought of their women being taken captive.

[...]

If the people in one state have peace for very long [Lands Knecht!], most of the noble youths go off to other nations where a war of some sort is going on, for peace is repulsive to the Germans, and the path to glory lies in danger. The prince gives them war horses out of mercy and a blood-stained spear of victory. [That is to say, the prince gives his associates horses and armor.] As a substitute for pay they receive banquets and provisions, in abundance, coarse though they may be. They seize so much in battle and by plundering that they are able to be generous and lavish. These men are not so inclined to tend the land and wait for the harvest, but rather to provoke their enemy and take wounds as their reward. In truth, they regard it as a dull and stupid thing to accumulate by the sweat of the brow what might be won through bloodshed. [Unchristian!]

In the intervals between wars they do not spend much time hunting, but they lounge about, eating and sleeping, even the boldest and most bellicose among them. The care of the house and its belongings, their religious rites, and the cultivation of the fields are left to the women, the old men, and the weak. They have an amazingly contradictory nature, for they love neither peace nor work.

The peoples of Germany do not dwell in cities, and they do not even build their houses together. Each lives where he wants, where he finds a spring, a field, or a forest that he fancies. They do not lay out their villages like ours, one

house next to the other, but every man establishes a clear space around his house, possibly as a precaution against fires, or perhaps from pure ignorance of the art of building. The do not use lime or shingles; all their materials are unseemly and without attention to aesthetics. In some places they do plaster the buildings, so clearly and beautifully as though they were painted. They likewise make a practice of digging cellars, which they cover with a heap of manure, as winter refuges and as storehouses for their vegetables and grain, and there they keep their things, even from their enemies, who do not look for the hidden. [Castles!]

They wear cloaks fastened with a buckle or a pin, otherwise they are naked and sit the whole day by the fire. The richest are distinguished by their clothing but they do not have loose clothing like the Sarmatians and Parthians, but rather clothing so tight that one can discern the shape of the limbs.

[...]

NOTES

[1] The explications in brackets were inserted into Tacitus's text by a commentator—trans.
[2] While most English translations from Tacititus' Latin render this as "generals," the German text here uses "Fürsten," which correlates with the title of prince rather than a military position per se—trans.
[3] i.e., back from the battlefield—trans.

Source of German text: *Ein zamengelesen buochlin von der Teutschen Nation gelegenheit, Sitten vnd gebrauche, durch Cornelium Tacitum vnd etliche andere verzeichnet* (1526), edited by Achim Masser. Innsbrucker Beiträge zur Kulturwissenschaft/ Germanistische Reihe 30. Innsbruck: Institut für Germanistik, 1986, pp. 33, 45, 47, 49, 55, 57.

Translation: Translated into English by Ellen Yutzy Glebe, with reference to The Agricola and Germania of Tacitus, translated into English by K. B. Townshend. London: Methuen Co., 1894, pp. 57–61, 67–69; and to Germany and Agricola of Tacitus. The Oxford translation revised with notes. New York: Translation Publishing Company, 1922, pp. 7–12.

Recommended Citation: The "Germania" of Tacitus as received by German Humanists: Johann Eberlin von Günzburg, Ein zamengelesen buochlin von der teutschen Nation [A Collected Booklet about the German Nation](1526), published in: German History Intersections, <https://germanhistory-intersections.org/en/germanness/ghis:document-251> [April 29, 2024].