Tacitus: Germania

Tacitus, an important Roman historian, wrote the most detailed early description of the Germans at the end of the first century CE. In doing so, be warned, he was commenting on the Rome of his own time, as much as on the German themselves.

Chapter 1
Geography of Germany. "The various peoples of Germany are separated from the Gauls by the Rhine, from the Raetians and Pannonians by the Danube, and from the Sarmatians and Dacians by mountains - or, where there are no mountains, by mutual fear. The northern parts of the country are girdles by the sea, flowing round broad peninsulas and vast islands where a campaign of the present century has revealed to us the existence of some nations and kings hitherto unknown.

The Rhine rises in a remote and precipitous height of the Raetian alps and afterwards turns slightly westward to flow into the North Sea. The Danube issues from a gentle slope of moderate height in the Black Forest, and after passing more peoples than the Rhine in its course discharges itself into the Black Sea through six channels - a seventh mouth being lost in the marshlands.

Chapter 2
The Inhabitants. Origins of the Name "Germany". The Germans themselves I should regard as aboriginal, and not mixed at all with other races through immigration or intercourse. For, in former times it was not by land but on shipboard that those who sought to emigrate would arrive; and the boundless and, so to speak, hostile ocean beyond us, is seldom entered by a sail from our world. And, beside the perils of rough and unknown seas, who would leave Asia, or Africa for Italy for Germany, with its wild country, its inclement skies, its sullen manners and aspect, unless indeed it were his home?

In their ancient songs, their only way of remembering or recording the past they celebrate an earth-born god Tuisco, and his son Mannus, as the origin of their race, as their founders. To Mannus they assign three sons, from whose names, they say, the coast tribes are called Ingaevones; those of the interior, Herminones; all the rest, Istaevones. Some, with the freedom of conjecture permitted by antiquity, assert that the god had several descendants, and the nation several appellations, as Marsi, Gambrivii, Suevi, Vandilii, and that these are nine old names.

The name Germany, on the other hand, they say is modern and newly introduced, from the fact that the tribes which first crossed the Rhine and drove out the Gauls, and are now called Tungrians, were then called Germans. Thus what was the name of a tribe, and not of a race, gradually prevailed, till all called themselves by this self-invented name of Germans, which the conquerors had first employed to inspire terror.

Chapter 4
Physical Characteristics. For my own part, I agree with those who think that the tribes of Germany are free from all taint of intermarriages with foreign nations, and that they appear as a distinct, unmixed race, like none but themselves. Hence, too, the same physical peculiarities throughout so vast a population. All have fierce blue eyes, red hair, huge frames, fit only for a
sudden exertion. They are less able to bear laborious work. Heat and thirst they cannot in the
least endure; to cold and hunger their climate and their soil inure them.

Chapter 7
Government. Influence of Women. They choose their kings by birth, their generals for merit.
These kings have not unlimited or arbitrary power, and the generals do more by example than by
authority. If they are energetic, if they are conspicuous, if they fight in the front, they lead
because they are admired. But to reprimand, to imprison, even to flog, is permitted to the priests
alone, and that not as a punishment, or at the general's bidding, but, as it were, by the mandate of
the god whom they believe to inspire the warrior.

They also carry with them into battle certain figures and images taken from their sacred groves.
And what most stimulates their courage is, that their squadrons or battalions, instead of being
formed by chance or by a fortuitous gathering, are composed of families and clans. Close by
them, too, are those dearest to them, so that they hear the shrieks of women, the cries of infants.
They are to every man the most sacred witnesses of his bravery—they are his most generous
applauders. The soldier brings his wounds to mother and wife, who shrink not from counting or
even demanding them and who administer food and encouragement to the combatants

Chapter 11
Councils. About minor matters the chiefs deliberate, about the more important the whole tribe.
Yet even when the final decision rests with the people, the affair is always thoroughly discussed
by the chiefs. They assemble, except in the case of a sudden emergency, on certain fixed days,
either at new or at full moon; for this they consider the most auspicious season for the transaction
of business. Instead of reckoning by days as we do, they reckon by nights, and in this manner fix
both their ordinary and their legal appointments. Night they regard as bringing on day.
Their freedom has this disadvantage, that they do not meet simultaneously or as they are bidden,
but two or three days are wasted in the delays of assembling. When the multitude think proper,
they sit down armed. Silence is proclaimed by the priests, who have on these occasions the right
of keeping order. Then the king or the chief, according to age, birth, distinction in war, or
elocution, is heard, more because he has influence to persuade than because he has power to
command. If his sentiments displease them, they reject them with murmurs; if they are satisfied,
they brandish their spears. The most complimentary form of assent is to express approbation
with their spears

Chapter 12
Punishments. Administration of Justice. In their councils an accusation may be preferred or a
capital crime prosecuted. Penalties are distinguished according to the offense. Traitors and
deserters are hanged on trees; the coward, the unwarlike, the man stained with abominable vices,
is plunged into the mire of the morass with a hurdle put over him. This distinction in punishment
means that crime, they think, ought, in being punished, to be exposed, while infamy ought to be
buried out of sight—Lighter offenses, too, have penalties proportioned to them; he who is
convicted, is fined in a certain number of horses or of cattle. Half of the fine is paid to the king or
to the state, half to the person whose wrongs are avenged and to his relatives. In these same
councils they also elect the chief magistrates, who administer law in the cantons and the towns.
Each of these has a hundred associates chosen from the people, who support him with their advice and influence.

Chapter 14
Warlike Ardor of the People. When they go into battle, it is a disgrace for the chief to be surpassed in velour, a disgrace for his followers not to equal the velour of the chief. And it is an infamy and a reproach for life to have survived the chief, and returned from the field. To defend, to protect him, to ascribe one's own brave deeds to his renown, is the height of loyalty. The chief fights for victory; his vassals fight for their chief. If their native state sinks into the sloth of prolonged peace and repose, many of its noble youths voluntarily seek those tribes which are waging some war, both because inaction is odious to their race, and because they win renown more readily in the midst of peril, and cannot maintain a numerous following except by violence and war.

Indeed, men look to the liberality of their chief for their war-horse and their bloodstained and victorious lance. Feasts and entertainments, which, though inelegant, are plentifully furnished, are their only pay. The means of this bounty come from war and rapine. Nor are they as easily persuaded to plough the earth and to wait for the year's produce as to challenge an enemy and earn the honor of wounds. Nay, they actually think it tame and stupid to acquire by the sweat of toil what they might win by their blood.

Chapter 15
Habits in Time of Peace. Whenever they are not fighting, they pass much of their time in the chase, and still more in idleness, giving themselves up to sleep and to feasting, the bravest and the most warlike doing nothing, and surrendering the management of the household, of the home, and of the land, to the women, the old men, and all the weakest members of the family. They themselves lie buried in sloth, a strange combination in their nature that the same men should be so fond of idleness, so averse to peace. It is the custom of the states to bestow by voluntary and individual contribution on the chiefs a present of cattle or of grain, which, while accepted as a compliment, supplies their wants. They are particularly delighted by gifts from neighboring tribes, which are sent not only by individuals but also by the state, such as choice steeds, heavy armor, trappings, and neck-chains. We have now taught them to accept money also.

Chapter 17
Dress. They all wrap themselves in a cloak which is fastened with a clasp, or, if this is not forthcoming, with a thorn, leaving the rest of their persons bare. They pass whole days on the hearth by the fire. The wealthiest are distinguished by a dress which is not flowing like that of the Sarmatae and Parthi, but is tight, and exhibits each limb. They also wear the skins of wild beasts; the tribes on the Rhine and Danube in a careless fashion, those of the interior with more elegance, as not obtaining other clothing by commerce. These select certain animals, the hides of which they strip off and vary them with the spotted skins of beasts, the produce of the outer ocean, and of seas unknown to us. The women have the same dress as the men except that they generally wrap themselves in linen garments, which they embroder with purple, and do not lengthen out the upper part of their clothing into sleeves. The upper and lower arm is thus bare, and the nearest part of the bosom is also exposed.
Chapter 17
Marriage Laws. Their marriage code, however, is strict, and indeed no part of their manners is more praiseworthy. Almost alone among barbarians they are content with one wife, except a very few among them, and these not from sensuality, but because their noble birth procures for them many offers of alliance. The wife does not bring a dower to the husband, but the husband to the wife. The parents and relatives are present, and pass judgment on the marriage-gifts, 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. With these presents the wife is espoused, and she herself in her turn brings her husband a gift of arms.

This they count their strongest bond of union, these their sacred mysteries, these their gods of marriage. Lest the woman should think herself to stand apart from aspirations after noble deeds and from the perils of war, she is reminded by the ceremony which inaugurates marriage that she is her husband's partner in toil and danger, destined to suffer and to dare with him alike both in in war. The yoked oxen, the harnessed steed, the gift of arms proclaim this fact. She must live and die with the feeling that she is receiving what she must hand down to her children neither tarnished nor depreciated, what future daughters-in-law may receive, and may be so passed on to her grandchildren.

Chapter 21
Hereditary Feuds. Fines for Homicide. Hospitality It is a duty among them to adopt the feuds as well as the friendships of a father or a kinsman. These feuds are not implacable; even homicide is expiated by the payment of a certain number of cattle and of sheep, and the satisfaction is accepted by the entire family, greatly to the advantage of the state, since feuds are dangerous in proportion to the people's freedom. This is to the advantage of the community: for private feuds are particularly dangerous where there is such complete liberty.

No nation indulges more profusely in entertainments and hospitality. To exclude any human being from their roof is thought impious; every German, according to his means, receives his guest with a well-furnished table. When his supplies are exhausted, he who was but now the host becomes the guide and companion to further hospitality, and without invitation they go to the next house. It matters not; they are entertained with like cordiality. No one distinguishes between an acquaintance and a stranger, as regards the rights of hospitality. It is usual to give the departing guest whatever he may ask for, and a present in return is asked with as little hesitation. They are greatly charmed with gifts, but they expect no return for what they give, nor feel any obligation for what they receive

Adapted from: http://www.unrv.com/tacitus/tacitusgermania.php