



## SOURCE READING 6

### A Roman Historian Describes the German Tribes

**G**ermanic tribes lived on the frontiers of the Roman Empire for centuries. Most of what modern historians know about the customs, appearance, and beliefs of the Germanic tribes comes from a Roman—not Germanic—historian. Cornelius Tacitus, a Roman lawyer, official, and historian, wrote *Germania*, excerpted below, in A.D. 98. Tacitus describes the Germans along the Rhine River frontier of the empire. In part, the historian used the Germanic tribes as moral examples of upright, if primitive, people who still held on to the simple virtues that many Romans had forgotten. He also had sources of factual information about laws, customs, and fighting methods gathered from nearly 100 years of Roman wars and other contacts with the Germans.

**Guided Reading** *In this selection, read to learn how German men and women lived, dressed, and worshiped.*

For myself, I accept the view that the peoples of Germany . . . remain . . . distinct and unlike any other nation. One result of this is that their physical characteristics, insofar as one can generalize . . . , are always the same: fierce-looking blue eyes, reddish hair, and big frames—which, however, can exert their strength only by means of violent effort. They are less able to endure toil or fatiguing tasks and cannot bear thirst or heat, though their climate has inured [accustomed] them to cold spells and the poverty of their soil to hunger.

. . . The appearance of the country differs considerably in different parts; but in general it is covered either by bristling forests or by foul swamps. It is wetter on the side that faces Gaul [modern France], windier on the side of Noricum and Pannonia [Austria, Hungary]. A good soil for cereal crops, it will not grow fruit-trees. It is well provided with livestock; but the animals are mostly undersized, and even the cattle lack the handsome heads that are their natural glory. It is the mere number of them that the Germans take pride in; for these are the only form of wealth they have, and are much prized. . . .

. . . Above all other gods they worship Mercury, and count it no sin, on certain feast-days to include human victims in the sacrifices offered to him. Hercules and Mars they appease by offerings of animals, in accordance with ordinary civilized custom. . . . The Germans do not think it in keeping with the divine majesty to

confine gods within walls or to portray them in the likeness of any human countenance. Their holy places are woods and groves, and they apply the names of deities to that hidden presence which is seen only by the eye of reverence.

. . . It is a well-known fact that the peoples of Germany never live in cities and will not even have their houses adjoin one another. They dwell apart, dotted about here and there, wherever a spring, plain, or grove takes their fancy. Their villages are not laid out in the Roman style, with buildings adjacent and connected. Every man leaves an open space round his house, perhaps as a precaution against the risk of fire, perhaps because they are inexpert builders. They do not even make use of stones or wall-tiles; . . . they employ rough-hewn timber, ugly and unattractive-looking. Some parts, however, they carefully smear over with a clay of such purity and brilliance that it looks like painting or coloured design. . . .

. . . The universal dress in Germany is a cloak fastened with a brooch or, failing that, a thorn. They pass whole days by the fireside wearing no garment but this. It is a mark of great wealth to wear undergarments, which . . . fit tightly and follow the contour of every limb. They also wear the skins of wild animals. . . . The dress of the women differs from that of the men in two respects only: women often wear outer garments of linen ornamented with a purple pattern; and as the upper part of these is sleeveless, the whole of their arms . . .



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are exposed.

... Their marriage code, however, is strict, and no feature of their morality deserves higher praise. They are almost unique among barbarians in being content with one wife apiece—all of them, that is, except a very few who take more than one wife . . . because their exalted rank brings them many pressing offers of matrimonial alliances. The dowry is brought by husband to wife, not by wife to husband. Parents and kinsmen attend and approve the gifts—not gifts chosen to please a woman's fancy or gaily deck a young bride, but oxen, a horse with its bridle, or a shield, spear, and sword. In consideration of such gifts a man gets his wife, and she in her turn brings a present of arms [weapons]

to her husband. This interchange of gifts typifies for them the most sacred bond of union, sanctified by mystic rites under the favor of the presiding deities of wedlock. The woman must not think that she is excluded from aspirations to manly virtues or exempt from the hazards of warfare. That is why she is reminded, in the ceremonies which bless her marriage . . . , that she enters her husband's home to be the partner of his toils and perils, that both in peace and in war she is to share his sufferings and adventures. That is the meaning of the team of oxen, the horse ready for its rider, and the gift of arms. . . . She is receiving something that she must hand over intact and undepreciated to her children. . . .

### INTERPRETING THE READING

**Directions** Use information from the reading to answer the following questions. If necessary, use a separate sheet of paper.

1. What did German men and women look like in person and dress?

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2. How does Tacitus describe the landscape?

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3. What were the Germans' religious beliefs and how did they worship?

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4. What kinds of gifts were given at a Germanic wedding ceremony? According to Tacitus, how did this ceremony indicate the status of married women in Germanic society?

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### Critical Thinking

5. **Making Inferences** In what ways does Tacitus—a sophisticated Roman city dweller—seem to approve of the Germans' primitive frontier life?

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