

Ancient Germans



Drittes bis viertes Jahrhundert.

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ABOUT THE MIDDLE OF THE THIRD CENTURY there appeared near the lower Rhine a confederacy of German tribes known as *Franks*. They are believed to be the same which were known to the Romans in the time of the first Emperors, as Sigambri, Chainavi, Bructeri, Catti, &c. Of these the Sigambri, (a tribe, said by some writers to have descended from the Scythians), were the most powerful. All speculations upon the origin of the German tribes, their relation to other branches of the Arian race, and the routes by which they reached Europe, belong to the sciences of ethnology and antiquities.

Scholars are agreed that the languages of the Celtic, German and Slavonic tribes, with the ancient tongues of Persia, India, Greece and Italy, have enough in common to prove that they are but modifications or branches of one original language, spoken ages ago by the common ancestors of these people. •

The land was not a common possession, but the soil in part became the property of the individual freeman, and the citizens who were such only by virtue of their interest in the land, were distinguished by their proud and independent spirit. They disliked enclosed villages, and especially walled towns, which seemed to them like prisons, yet they sometimes surrounded a strong place with wall and ditch as a refuge. Every proprietor set along his borders block-houses, built firmly and strongly of trunks of trees, and the gables washed with lime. He cultivated his land by the labour of slaves, or received contributions from his dependents. For himself, war and the chase or idleness, were the only occupations worthy of a freeman.

The land abounded in game, and most of the clothing was made of furs ; but the women wore linen cloth, and gold and silver ornaments were not uncommon among the rich. The people held sacred their

home life, and especially the marriage tie, which was formed by the man offering to the maiden, not gold, but a steed, a yoke of oxen and arms. The women then lived in high honour, not only as the lady and mistress of the household, but as the companion, counsellor and friend of her husband. The women would often accompany the army as it marched out to battle, and their shouts fired the soldiers hearts. The children of freemen and slaves grew up together, until the right of bearing arms distinguished the freemen.

Their arms consisted of the terrible spear or lance, called *framea*, which they threw to an incredible distance, and of swords, long lances, axes, clubs, and bows and arrows. Their shields were of wood, painted with gaudy colours. They had also horsemen, clad in armor, while the footmen who were mingled with them. in the fight, were without coats of mail. They formed for battle in the shape of a wedge, in which they were arranged according to family and district, each tribe having the figure of some wild beast borne before it as its standard. Before the fight they struck up their ***Barrit***, or battle song. It was no disgrace to give way, but the warrior must not lose his shield.

They had no temples, but prayed to the gods in groves and forests; nor had they, like the Celts, a professional priesthood, but, in the ancient Arian fashion the father exercised the priestly office for his household, and the nobleman for his clan and district, by offerings and invocations to the gods. But there were many religious customs ; lots were cast, the flight of birds watched, the neighing of horses carefully listened to as portents, and the result of a battle was predicted according to that of a previously arranged combat; similar regard was paid to days and seasons, new moon and full moon.

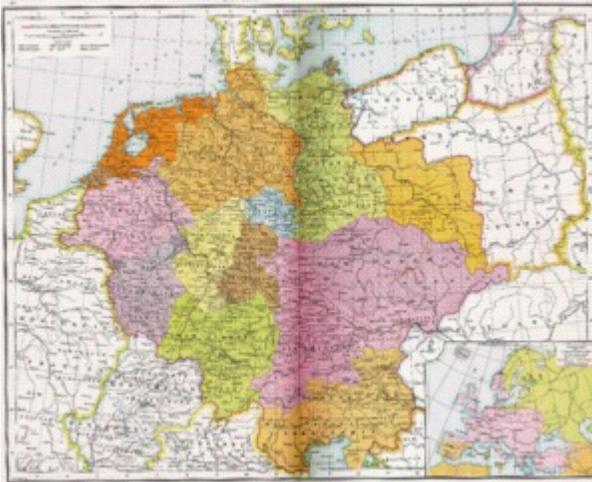
The great virtues of the people—bravery, chastity, truth and hospitality—were shadowed only by the vices of drunkenness and gambling, but even in these practices their invincible pluck and their delicate sense of honour extorted admiration. They had, besides, an invincible passion for unbridled freedom, or rather wilfulness, which did much to incapacitate them for regular labour or for discipline, and to confine their exertions

to war and the chase. The whole organization of society grew out of that obstinate and passionate independence of spirit which was the most prominent feature of the national character. The individual must be independent of his family, and would not broach any intermeddling by it with his private affairs. The family must be independent of the tribe or district, while protecting each of its members against all attacks from without, and this passion for independence extended itself also to the tribe and to the whole nation when threatened by strangers. while it offered an almost insuperable barrier to any permanent political union among the men, families, or tribes of the Germans themselves.

However strong the pressure, and however close the union for the time, it was at once disintegrated when the pressure was removed. This was perhaps the most universal and obvious characteristic of the Germans everywhere, as distinguished from the nations around them; all of which had as much more readiness for organization, guidance and union as they had less of individual spirit and energy.

The system of atoning for crime by the payment of a definite sum of money is the prominent feature in the ancient German codes of laws; and it exercised a potent influence by no means for good upon their social life. The freemen proprietors of land in any neighbourhood, formed among themselves the canton or association of the marches (*pagus*

markgenos.sensehaft), which held all the land, whether wood, meadow or moor, not appropriated to any private owner, under the name of commons (or *almend*),



This association also met in assembly, to decide upon legal questions of right and law. It was the most influential form in which.

the social life of the people expressed itself. The cattle of its members formed one herd; their cultivated lands, one unbroken field. They fought together in the armies, and voted together in the great assemblies of the tribe. A certain number of these associations constituted a *district* (gau above), which usually had natural features of the land for its boundaries ; while each hundred associations (or heads of families), formed a *hundred*, with a *count* at its head.

The general assembly of the people, in each of the cantons and districts, came together at fixed times, especially at new or full moon, and usually on some consecrated mountain or plain. Here all the freemen took counsel together, under the presidency of a king or the prince of the district; and under the advice of the priests or nobility. Every man came in his armor. Here questions of war and peace were decided. Young freemen on reaching manhood, were by the stroke of the sword made capable of bearing arms and of managing their own affairs; and judgments were given upon life and property. Here too were chosen, by the whole people, out of the noble houses, the princes who should hold, usually, for life, the office of leader and judge of the districts.

It was the ancestral custom that the judges should sit in the open air, in the public court or place of assembly (mall), surrounded by assessors or jurymen. But it does not appear that these assemblies were ever regarded as having the power to condemn a freeman to death, or to any bodily injury or restraint. No judicial power existed among the early Germans which could invade the absolute sanctity of the man's person, the first principle of their social institutions, which lay deep in their character. A private injury, were it even murder, was an offence to be condemned and punished, not by the community, but by the injured man and his family.

It was this that gave rise to that custom of family feuds, and of vengeance by blood relations, which constantly revived during the middle ages, in spite of the laws, and of the ablest rulers, and threw society into disorder. The general assembly also chose the "duke" or general, who should hold the chief command during a war and at its end return to his former positions. The choice was finally pro-

claimed and ratified by elevating the duke on a shield upon the shoulders of the men. But besides nobles and freemen, there were also another class of people, who like women and children, were recognized by the law only in so far as they were represented by a freeman as their guardian. These people were of two classes; first freedmen or peasants, who held a piece of land in fee, paying tribute or rendering service to the owner; the other class were slaves, who were regarded as subjects **of** barter and sale and are actually spoken of as *things* in the ancient laws.

They were commonly mildly treated, and held a piece of land and a dwelling-place assigned by their master. But they were mere chattels in his hands, utterly destitute of rights, and with no appeal from his will. He tortured them at pleasure; and if he slew them in his anger, his only punishment was the loss of their services. Before the law, slaves and beasts were of the **same class**.

The peasants were probably descended from the original inhabitants who had been conquered; the slaves were mainly prisoners of war, and their posterity. The freedmen were a middle class between the slaves and freemen. They could bear arms, and avenge themselves, or their kindred, even against freemen, although the compensation for their lives was but half as great as for those of the free. But they were excluded from any active part in the administration of justice, and in the public assembly, because they held their land, not freely, but upon condition of service and contribution. Probably more than one-half of the entire population belonged to these two classes and were without civil rights.

The Germans were peculiarly disposed to attach themselves unreservedly to others—to devote themselves absolutely to the service of a chosen master. This allegiance, when assumed, was voluntary, but proved an obligation which was observed afterward like a conscience; it was assumed sometimes by a mutual pledge of friendship, sometimes by covenant service, and afterward in feudal times by an act of homage. In all these respects, personal allegiance was emphatically a German idea ; and it gave new strength to the social ties of wedlock, of companionship, of military brotherhood and service. This disposition gave rise among the Germans to the associations out of which gradually grew, in after-times,

the feudal system and the modern monarchies. Freemen without estates, refugees from the avenger of blood in a family feud, or younger sons left without a heritage attached themselves to some nobleman's person and devoted themselves to his service.

These formed his following; he was their lord and bread-giver, and at their head made warlike expeditions in search of plunder, which his followers shared. If he had continuous good luck in his expeditions, his fame grew great; he was called as descended of noble blood, the king; and it was even possible that such a leader should subdue an entire country. Such was generally the origin of a *Kingdom* among the *Germans*; the name being given originally only to the conquered country or territory, when the king established his faithful friends as *counts* of hundreds or districts, and his inferior followers as local judges.

The title of king was not hereditary at first, yet in choosing and inaugurating a new king, by elevating him on a shield, there was a tendency to cling to the house which had once been consecrated to the (ace. The power of a duke which was not originally a permanent office, might, in the hands of a rich and influential nobleman grow to that of a king. When the character and manner of the ancient Germans are closely examined, they no longer appear like rude savages.

The direct historical evidence concerning the religion of the ancient Germans is scanty. It is known that it was most intimately incorporated with the thoughts, characters and lives of the people; that their old beliefs and usages continued, to be cherished for centuries after the introduction of Christianity, side by side with those of the purer religion. But a meagre account of their religion when they first came in contact with the Romans can now be gathered from contemporary records.

They acknowledged a God of Heaven, Wuotan or Wodan (the same as the Northern Odin, the spirit of nature), with one eye—for Heaven has but **one** eye, the sun. He supports the grey vault of clouds, and the blue arch above; in storms he rides high on his steed, through the air, followed by his furious host, like "the wild hunter" of the legends, who is his counterpart. He is also the god of the harvest, who grants favours,

dispenses -victory, and in general rules the world. The wolf and the raven were sacred to him, horses were sacrificed on his altars. Among plants the ash and the hazel trees were consecrated to him. His son was Dollar, the god of tempest, who blows the lightnings out from his red beard, drives through heaven in a car drawn by rams and brandishes his mighty hammer in unceasing war against the giants. To him the lofty oak and red ash are sacred.

The fox and the squirrel are his animals. At his side stands the one-armed god of the sword, called Ziu Tyr, or Saxnot. Besides these they worshiped a goddess of earth and heaven, before whom also their tempest hymn was sung. She was known by various names: as the dark earth that swallows the dead, she was called Lady Hel-Holle; as the earth gleaming in a white winter garment, she was Lady Bertha. Tacitus calls her Nerthus, and places her abode in an island in the North Sea, where are her mysterious grove and lake, and her car, which at times bears peace and joy through the nations.

A more human conception is that of the spinner, the mother of the gods, who blesses home and hearth, and takes charge of children who die unborn. The forces of nature, whether friendly or hostile to man, are personated in many forms, especially in the dwarfs, who are cunning magicians, the guardians of the earth's hidden treasures, and master workmen in metals; and in the hated giants, the embodiments of brute, blind force, the ancient lords of the earth, foes to gods and men. -

Among the kindred tribes of the North the same simple religion of nature, assumes a more majestic form, Their heroic poems were their holy books; and enough of these have fortunately been preserved to throw much light on 'the faith. of the whole German race.

The Scandinavians, in part, clung to their heathenism for several centuries after most of the. Germans abandoned it, and until their early doctrines had been reduced to writing; and in the "Edda's" of Iceland we have writings which are to the religion of the early Germans what the Homeric poems are to that of ancient Greece. Seine of the songs contained, in the first "Edda" (written early in the twelfth century), are evidently extremely ancient, even in their form, and in all probability

are but transcripts of traditions handed down from times much earlier than the invasion of Europe. They represent Odin (Woutan), throned on his lofty seat in the Walhalla, in golden armour; on his shoulders sit the ravens, Hugin and Mullin (thought and recollection), and two wolves lie at his feet. Thence he rules the world and sends the virgins to battle, to bring the heroes who fall on the field up to the eternal abodes of the gods.

These songs, too, celebrate the wars of Thor (Ilonar), with the giants. The place of the German Holda or Bertha, is filled by Odin's wife, Friga, and at her side is **Freia**, the goddess of love and beauty, who is drawn in her car by cats. Her brother, Freyr, the kindly beaming god of Ran and spring, rides on the boar with golden bristles, and to him, as god of peace and joy, are consecrated the July days, and the winter solstice.

The entire fabric of the world is conceived by it as embodied in one giant ash-tree, Ygdrasil, which stretches upward through the kingdoms of the universe, the greatest of these being Asenheinn, the home of gods ; Mannheim, that of men; and Yotunheim, that of giants. At the fountain Urd which springs up at the root of the great Ash-tree sit the Nornes, the sisters of destiny. Bat stags are -feeding on the blossoms of the tree, a dragon gnaws at its roots.

The snake of Midgard. in the ocean surrounds the whole earth. Even the sun and moon are chased through the sky by wolves, which threaten to swallow them. Death and sin, too, have entered the community of gods. Baldur, the fairest, and purest of them all, has been slain by the cunning of the wicked Loki, a descendant of the giants, and father of Hel, of the snake of Midgard and of the Fenris wolf. This wolf it is that most endangers the gods and the world. He still lies chained by magic in the iron forest ; but whenever the blood of kindred is wantonly shed on earth, it trickles into his closed mouth, and gives him strength.

One day. he will break loose and then comes the twilight of the gods, the end of the world. Then Surtur, at the head of the fire demons, sons

of Muspelheim, storms across the bridge Bifrost, to attack Asenheim; the snake of Midgard unwinds its folds, and Naglfar, the ship of death, comes over the sea. Heimdal, the watchman at the end of the bridge, blows the Gjallar horn, and the frightful struggle begins. In hand-to-hand fight all are slain, gods and monsters; at last Surtur scatters fire over the world, and it is consumed. But out of the flames arises a new creation, Baldur returns, and with him a blessed age of innocence.

It has been a question in the minds of some, whether the "Edda" can be regarded as an expression of the faith of the Germans, and some contend that ' it represents the weird imagination of the heathen poets. Its essential conceptions of the gods, its moral motives, and its views of life are all thoroughly German, and as far as it contains a religion, it may safely be accepted as the religion of all the German tribes.

That Thor, Odin, or Wodan, and Freia were great gods of all the Germans is imperishably witnessed by the names of the days of the week. Thursday, Wednesday, and Friday, which are named for them in every branch of the German tongue. Baldur was honoured as a god among the half-Christians of Germany in the days of Pepin of Heristal ; and a German Christian poet of the ninth century gives to the final judgment (predicted in the New Testament), a form and colouring evidently imitated from the Edda's "Twilight of the Gods."

It is probable that the one greater thought of the Edda, the perishableness of the universe, including even the gods known and worshiped, was deeply impressed upon the minds of a large part of the German race, and did much to prepare them as it prepared the Norsemen for receiving the Christian doctrine of "Him who only path immortality."



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