

# Who We Are #15 — Ancient Germans



DISSIDENT MILLENNIAL (EDITOR) • 6 SEPTEMBER, 2017

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*Ancient Germans, Balts Staked Claims on Northern Europe 6,000 Years Ago  
Baltic Languages, Traditions Closest to those of Ancient Indo-Europeans  
German Growth, Roman Imperialism Led to Conflict*

CLOSELY RELATED TO the Celts, whose fortunes we traced in the previous installment, and settled into the area of Europe directly north of them, were the Germans. Like the Celts, they immigrated into northern Europe over a period of many centuries; the first wave of Battle-Axe People to leave the ancient Nordic heartland in the forests and steppes of southern Russia appeared in the Germanic area of northern Europe even before the Neolithic Revolution had become well established there, prior to 4,000 B.C.

It would be incorrect, of course, to refer to these earliest Nordic immigrants as “Germans.” All that can be said of them, just as of those immigrants south of them

who later gave birth to the Celts, is that they were Indo-Europeans. The process of cultural-ethnic differentiation — complicated by repeated waves of immigration from the old heartland, by mixing with the indigenous population there since at least Mesolithic times, and by internal migrations — had not resulted in the fairly clear-cut distinctions which allowed one group of people to be identified as Germans, another as Celts, and a third as Balts until approximately the first half of the first millennium B.C.

### **Scandinavian Origins**

By about 2,000 B.C., however, the ancestors of the Germans — call them proto-Germans — were at home in southern Sweden, the Danish peninsula, and the adjacent lands between the Elbe and the Oder. To the east were the proto-Balts, to the west and south the proto-Celts.

From this tiny proto-German homeland, about the size of the state of Tennessee, the Germans expanded their dominion during the ensuing 3,000 years over all of Europe, from Iceland to the Urals, ruling over Celts, Balts, Slavs, Latins, and Greeks, as well as the non-Indo-European peoples of the Roman Empire. After that it was Germanic peoples, primarily, who discovered, settled, and conquered North America and who, until the internal decay of the last few decades, wielded effective political power even over the non-White hordes of Asia and Africa.

### **Celtic Buffer**

Was there some quality which distinguished the Germans from the Celts, so that the former were able to prevail over the decaying civilization to the south and the latter were not? Certainly not initially, for the two were of the same stock. Nevertheless, the Germans had two enormous advantages over the Celts.

First, the proto-German homeland was buffered from the imperialistic designs of the Romans by the Celts; the latter took the full brunt of the Roman armies, while the German homeland remained relatively inviolate. And yet the Germans, unlike the Balts and the Slavs, had just enough contact with the Romans to serve as a stimulus for their later invasions and conquest of the Roman Empire.

### **Fewer Southerners**

Second, the proto-German area was much more sparsely settled by non-Indo-European aborigines than was the proto-Celtic area. The Neolithic Revolution had not fully established itself on the shores of the Baltic when the Indo-European ancestors of the Germans and the Balts began arriving. Consequently, there had been relatively little penetration of the area by farming peoples from the south — i.e., by Mediterraneans.

When the first wave of Indo-Europeans reached Scandinavia, they found a densely forested area inhabited mostly by the descendants of the Cro-Magnon big-game

hunters who had peopled northern Europe during the Ice Ages. Although these early Indo-European invaders were themselves farmers, they were not wholly dependent on agriculture for their livelihood; they were hunters, stockbreeders, and traders even more than they were tillers of the soil. Above all, they were warriors.

## **Megalithic Period**

The eighth installment in this series treated the arrival of the earliest Indo-Europeans in the proto-German area and their subsequent interaction with the local population. As described there, there eventually developed from this interaction the megalithic culture, which spread throughout the coastal regions of northwest Europe, including the proto-German area.

The oldest known megalithic tombs in Denmark and the surrounding area date back to 3,300 B.C. Skeletal remains and grave goods in these tombs indicate a proto-German society which was stratified, aristocratic, and patriarchal, and composed of people exhibiting both Nordic and Cro-Magnon racial traits.

Successive waves of Indo-Europeans entered the proto-German area from the southeast, reinforcing the Nordic racial element there and bringing about repeated cultural changes. One of the most important of these changes came toward the end of the third millennium B.C., with the first introduction of bronze tools and weapons into the area.

## **Mound Burials**

A later change, around 1,500 B.C., saw the shift from megalithic, multiple-burial tombs to single graves covered with mounds of earth and stones. This change paralleled the rise of the Tumulus culture in the Celtic area and, like the latter, reflected renewed and intensified influence from the old Indo-European homeland beyond the Black Sea. The Scandinavian burial mounds of this Middle Bronze Age period were practically identical to the kurgan burials in the old homeland.

The Scandinavian area was congenial to the Bronze Age Germans. They lived, like the Celts, in small communities in forest clearings and in fortified hilltop villages. They wore garments woven from the wool of their sheep, with leather shoes, belts and other accessories. Their communities contained expert craftsmen and gifted artists, who worked in textiles, polished stone, wood, bone and walrus ivory, ceramics, bronze, copper, gold, and amber.

## **Significance of Amber**

Amber is the fossilized resin of pine trees. Although it has been found in a number of locations, by far the most abundant source lies along the shores of the Baltic Sea. Enormous deposits of the lustrous organic mineral were laid down there about 60 million years ago, during the Tertiary Period, when dense pine forests along the south-central Baltic shore were drowned by one of the periodic encroachments of

the sea onto the land. Amber is not only decorative and easy to carve and polish, but its interesting electrical properties (the word “electricity” itself comes from the Greek word for amber, elektron) have caused people to impute magical powers to it since prehistoric times.

Long before 2,000 B.C. amber became an article of commerce in Europe, with the luxury-craving civilizations of the Mediterranean and the Middle East trading metals and manufactured goods for the precious substance, which was fashioned primarily into jewelry, buttons, and other items of personal adornment. The beginning of the German Bronze Age was accompanied (and made possible) by an enormous increase in the amber trade. Their wealth of amber thus had important consequences for the early Germans: in an area in which the tin and copper ores needed for bronze smelting were scarce, it provided them early with imported metal for tools and weapons; and it stimulated them into probing far afield to open up new trade.

### **German Expansion**

Despite the fact that the proto-German area was less developed agriculturally than neighboring lands, the Germans underwent a population explosion during the Bronze Age and the early Iron Age, and they steadily expanded their territory to the west, the south, and the east. By about 300 B.C. they had pushed across the Elbe, into Celtic territory, and advanced as far as the Rhine. Shortly thereafter the German Belgae crossed the Rhine and seized Celtic land down to the Seine and the Marne.

To the east the expanding Germans came up against the Balts, whom they gradually pushed back from the Oder toward the Vistula. By 300 B.C. the Germans had control of all the Baltic lands between the Oder and the Vistula, as far south as the Carpathians.

### **The Baltic Peoples**

Let us interrupt our history of the early Germans just long enough to introduce the Balts. Later we will deal at length with the interaction between the Germans and the Balts during the Middle Ages.

While the ancestors of the Germans were settling southern Scandinavia, the ancestors of the Balts were occupying a considerable expanse of land to the east. The proto-Baltic area reached almost to the Oder River in the west. It stretched along the southeastern and eastern shore of the Baltic Sea as far north as the Gulf of Riga and as far inland as the present sites of Moscow to the east and Kursk, Kiev, and Warsaw to the south, encompassing the entire upper-Dnieper basin.

### **Finno-Ugrians**

To the north and east of the proto-Balts were the primitive, non-Indo-European Finno-Ugric tribes. To the south, in the upper-Dniester to middle-Dnieper region, were the proto-Slavs.

Before the Indo-European ancestors of the Balts arrived in this area, it was sparsely inhabited by hunting-gathering-fishing Upper Paleolithic survivors who had earlier infiltrated from the east, bringing Mongoloid traits with them. Some of the Baltic graves from the period immediately after the Indo-European arrival contain skeletons showing Mongoloid admixture.

A continued influx of Indo-Europeans reinforced the Nordic racial element in the Baltic area, however, and, at least in the western portion of this area, a clear boundary between the Finno-Ugrians in the north and the Balts in the south was eventually established. This boundary corresponded roughly to the northern limit of deciduous oak forests in eastern Europe.

The Balts were at home in the deciduous region, with its oaks and wildlife reminiscent of the ancient homeland, while the Finno-Ugrian hunter-fishers (ancestors of today's semi-Mongoloid Lapps, Samoyeds, and other inhabitants of the European Arctic regions) found themselves better acclimated than the Indo-Europeans to the evergreen and tundra areas of the far north.

### **Maritime and Continental Balts**

By the beginning of the Bronze Age in the Baltic settlement area, that area was effectively separated into two regions, and the inhabitants of those two regions were subject to rather different influences. To the west were the maritime Balts: those occupying eastern Pomerania, Poland, East Prussia, and western Lithuania and Latvia. To the east were the continental Balts: those in the region extending from eastern Latvia and Lithuania to the upper Volga basin.

The maritime Balts participated to a large extent in the Bronze Age cultural and economic developments of their German and Celtic cousins, trading amber to the Germans, who in turn carried it to the south. From the maritime Balts are descended the Prussians and the Curonians; in the Middle Ages the former inhabited the East Prussian area and the latter the western parts of Latvia and Lithuania.

### **Conservative Easterners**

The continental or eastern Balts, on the other hand, were somewhat isolated from the progressive developments in central and northern Europe. Their neighbors were Finno-Ugrians, Cimmerians, proto-Scythians, and proto-Slavs. In the upper-Dnieper (White Russian) and upper-Volga (Great Russian) areas they coexisted with the non-Indo-European descendants of the hunting-fishing tribes who had been there when the proto-Balts arrived. Although they kept themselves apart from

these more primitive people, the eastern Balts still were more conservative culturally than their western brothers.

The Balts as a whole, including the maritime Balts, preserved the cultural heritage of their ancient Indo-European ancestors to a far greater extent than did any other European people. They did not partake in the extensive migrations of the Iron Age Germans, and, after the initial amalgamation with the aborigines of the Baltic coast, were subject to fewer extraneous influences.

### **Most Archaic Language**

Modern Lithuanian is the most archaic (i.e., closest to the original Proto-Indo-European tongue) of extant European languages. Like the extinct Sanskrit, it has preserved many of the most ancient Indo-European word roots. The resemblances between the two languages, in fact, taking into account their enormous separations in space and time, are uncanny. Consider, for example, the old proverb, “God gave teeth; God will give bread.” In Lithuanian it is: “*Dievas dave dantis, Dievas duos duonos.*” And in ancient Sanskrit: “*Devas adadat dates; Devas dat dhanas.*”

In religion as in language the Balts scorned alien influences. Even more sturdily than the Saxons or the Norsemen did they resist the fire and sword by which Christianity was imposed on the other peoples of northern Europe. Although the already Christianized German knights of the Teutonic Order forced the Baltic Prussians and Latvians to submit to the cross in the 13th century, the Baltic villagers of East Prussia continued to practice their Indo-European religion well into the 17th century.

### **Baltic Traditions Preserved**

The Lithuanian nation officially subjected itself to the Pope in 1387, with the marriage of Lithuanian Grand Duke Jogaila to a Polish princess. In fact, however, Indo-European deities continued to be worshipped in the Lithuanian countryside for another 500 years, right up to the beginning of this century.

The chief Baltic deity was Dievas, the familiar Indo-European Sky Father (the modern Lithuanian common noun *dievas*, just as the Lettish *dievs*, actually means “sky”; both words are derived from the same Indo-European root which has given us “deity”). The number-two god was the Thunderer, the weather god. His name in Lithuanian was *Perkunas*; in Latvian, *Perkons*; in Prussian, *Perkonis* — all from the same Indo-European root as the Latin word for “oak” (*quercus*, originally *percus*), the sacred tree of the Indo-Europeans. Perkunas, of course, is cognate with the Germanic Donar, Thor.

One alien cultural element which did creep into the religion of the Balts soon after they had become thoroughly settled agriculturists was the feminine Earth Mother aspect of the religion of the Neolithic aborigines in the Baltic region. This was

grafted onto the essentially solar religion of the proto-Balts, and the fertility rites of the Balts were commented on by their German conquerors during the Middle Ages.

## **Back to the Germans**

As already mentioned, some 17 centuries before the Teutonic Order conquered the Baltic lands, German expansion eastward along the southern shore of the Baltic Sea had extended German settlement and rule from the Oder to the Vistula. At the same time, expansion was also taking place toward the west and the south, bringing about mingling — and often conflict — between Germans and Celts. With the Roman conquest of Gaul in the first century B.C., direct conflict between the expanding Germans and still mighty and expanding Rome became inevitable.

Actually the death struggle between Latins and Germans began even before Caesar's subjection of Gaul. Late in the second century two neighboring German tribes, the Cimbrians and the Teutons, left their homes in the Danish peninsula because, they said, of the sinking of much of their low-lying land into the sea. Some 300,000 in number, they headed south, crossing the Tyrolean Alps into northern Italy in 113 B.C., where they asked the Romans for permission either to settle or to cross Roman territory into the Celtic lands to the west.

## **A Tragic End**

The Roman consul, Papirius Carbo, attempted to halt them, and they defeated his army. The Germans then proceeded westward into Gaul and went as far as Spain, where they raised havoc. Ten years later, however, they returned to northern Italy.

This time they were met by a more competent Roman general, the consul Gaius Marius. In two horrendous battles, in 102 and 101 B.C., Marius virtually exterminated the Teutons and the Cimbrians. So many Teutons were massacred at Aquae Sextiae in 102 that, according to a contemporary Roman historian, their blood so fertilized the earth that the orchards there were especially fruitful for years afterward, and German bones were used to build fences around the vineyards.

## **More Conflict**

At Vercelli the Cimbrians met a similar fate the following year; more than 100,000 were slaughtered. When the German women saw their men being defeated, they first slew their children and then killed themselves in order to avoid the shame of slavery.

The annihilation of these two German nations was followed by a few decades in which Italy remained relatively safe from further incursions from the north. The Germans' territory was bounded, roughly, on the east by the Vistula and on the south by the Danube. In the west the boundary was less definite, and the Germans west of the Rhine came into repeated conflict with Roman armies in Gaul.

## **Tacitus on the Germans**

The Romans were naturally curious about the teeming tribes of fierce, warlike people beyond the Rhine who dared contest their conquest of the lands in northern Gaul, and several Roman writers enumerated them and described their way of life, most notably the historian Gaius Cornelius Tacitus. Writing in a first-century Rome which was thoroughly mongrelized, Tacitus was strongly impressed by the Germans' apparent racial homogeneity:

I concur in opinion with those who deem the Germans never to have intermarried with other nations but to be a pure and unmixed race, stamped with a distinct character. Hence, a family likeness pervades the whole, though their numbers are so great. Their eyes are stern and blue, their hair ruddy, and their bodies large, powerful in sudden exertion, but impatient of toil and not at all capable of sustaining thirst and heat. They are accustomed by their climate to endure cold and hunger.

## **German Women**

When the Germans fight, wrote Tacitus, perhaps remembering the example of the Teutons and Cimbrians, "they have within hearing the yells of their women and the cries of their children. These are the most revered witnesses of each man's conduct and his most liberal applauders."

... Tradition relates that armies beginning to give way have been rallied by the females, through the earnestness of their supplications, the interposition of their bodies, and the pictures they have drawn of impending slavery, a calamity which these people bear with more impatience for their women than themselves ....

If these appeals were not sufficient to elicit honorable behavior from each and every German, Tacitus added, their fellow tribesmen dealt with them severely: "Traitors and deserters are hanged; cowards and those guilty of unnatural practices are suffocated in mud under a hurdle." Subject to the same punishment as cowards and homosexuals were draft dodgers: those who failed to present themselves for military service when summoned.

## **German Youth**

The education of the German youth stressed not only bravery and skill in arms, but loyalty in the highest degree. Tacitus gives an interesting description of the mutual obligations between a German leader and his companions in arms:

The Germans transact no business, public or private, without being armed, but it is not customary for any person to assume arms until the state has approved his ability to use



them. Then, in the midst of the assembly, either one of the chiefs, or the father, or a relative, equips the youth with a shield and a spear. These are to them the manly gown (*toga virilis*); this is the first honor conferred on youth. Before, they are considered as part of a household; afterwards, of the state.

The dignity of chieftain is bestowed even on mere lads whose descent is eminently illustrious or whose fathers have performed outstanding services to the public. They are associated, however, with those of mature strength who have already been declared capable of service.... (This) state of companionship has several degrees, determined by the judgment of him whom they follow.

## **The Importance of Loyalty**

There is a great emulation among the companions as to which shall possess the highest place in the favor of their chief, and among the chiefs as to which shall excel in the number and valor of this companions. It is their dignity and their strength always to be surrounded by a large body of select youth: an ornament in peace, a bulwark in war.

In the field of battle it is disgraceful for the chief to be surpassed in valor, just as it is disgraceful for the companions not to equal their chief; but it is reproach and infamy during a whole succeeding life to retreat from the field surviving him. To aid and to protect him, to place their own gallant actions to the account of his glory, is their first and most sacred obligation. The chiefs fight for victory, the companions for their chief.

Thus, already in Tacitus' time, was the foundation in existence upon which the medieval institutions of chivalry and feudalism would rest.

## **Virtue, Hospitality, Freedom**

The philosopher Lucius Annaeus Seneca, also writing in the first century, shared Tacitus' respect for the Germans' martial qualities: "Who are braver than the Germans? Who more impetuous in the charge? Who fonder of arms, in the use of which they are born and nourished, which are their only care?"

Caesar, Tacitus, and other writers also described other attributes of the Germans and various aspects of their lives: their shrines, like those of the Celts and the Balts, were in sacred groves, open to the sky; their family life (in Roman eyes) was remarkably virtuous, although the German predilection for strong drink and games of chance must have been sorely trying to wives; they were extraordinarily hospitable to strangers and fiercely resentful of any infringements on their own rights and freedoms; each man jealously guarded his honor, and a liar was held in worse repute than a murderer; usury and prostitution were unknown among them.

## **Ariovistus and Caesar**

While the Romans were in the process of subduing the Gallic Celts, the latter were still squabbling among themselves, and one Celtic tribe involved in a struggle with a neighboring tribe invited Germans from the other side of the Rhine to come to its aid. Ariovistus, a chief of the Suabians, accepted the invitation, and along with 120,000 of his countrymen first defeated the Celts he had been called on to oppose and then those who had called him, taking possession of the greater portion of their land.

Other Celts, alarmed, asked Caesar's help in 57 B.C., and he sent a summons to Ariovistus, demanding that the German chief come to him. Whereupon Ariovistus sent his famous reply: "When I need Caesar, I shall come to Caesar. If Caesar needs me, let him seek me. What business has he in my Gaul, which I have acquired in war?"

## **Defeat of the Suabians**

Caesar accepted the challenge and marched immediately against Ariovistus. The two hosts engaged one another in what is now Alsace, not far from the present site of Muelhausen. The better discipline and tactical skill of the Romans prevailed, and those Suabians who were not slaughtered fled back across the Rhine.

During the next few years of Caesar's campaign to subdue the remainder of Gaul — including those portions already occupied by Germans, such as the Belgae in the northeast — other tribes continued to cross the Rhine into Gaul, as the Suabians had done. Unlike the case with the Suabians, however, the Celts, having suffered severely at the hands of the Romans meanwhile, were more inclined now to regard the invading Germans as potential allies against Caesar than as enemies.

## **Caesar Crosses the Rhine**

Caesar realized the danger this posed to him, and he made it a cardinal point of his strategy to discourage further German incursions into Gaul by reacting vigorously to each one. In 55 B.C. he built a wooden bridge across the Rhine, not far from the present site of Cologne, and took the war to the German side of the river.

The Germans, having learned to beware Caesar by this time, retreated eastward into the Westphalian forests, and the Romans spent 18 days ravaging German settlements and burning German crops before crossing the Rhine again. After this Rome claimed sovereignty over the entire western bank of the Rhine, all the way to its mouth.

## **Fateful Innovation**

Two years later, during the last major Gallic uprising against Rome, Caesar again crossed the Rhine and ravaged Westphalia, in order to prevent the Germans from

coming to the aid of the rebellious Celts. The following year he recruited German mercenaries from the portion of Westphalia which he had pacified, and they played a major role in helping him defeat the Celtic rebel chieftain, Vercingetorix, at Alesia.

When Caesar returned to Rome after mopping up the last Celtic resistance in Gaul, he took with him a German legion of 6,000 men, which afterward fought on his side during the Roman Civil War. This was the first time Rome had employed German mercenary soldiers on a large scale, and the new practice was to have fateful consequences for both Rome and Germany.