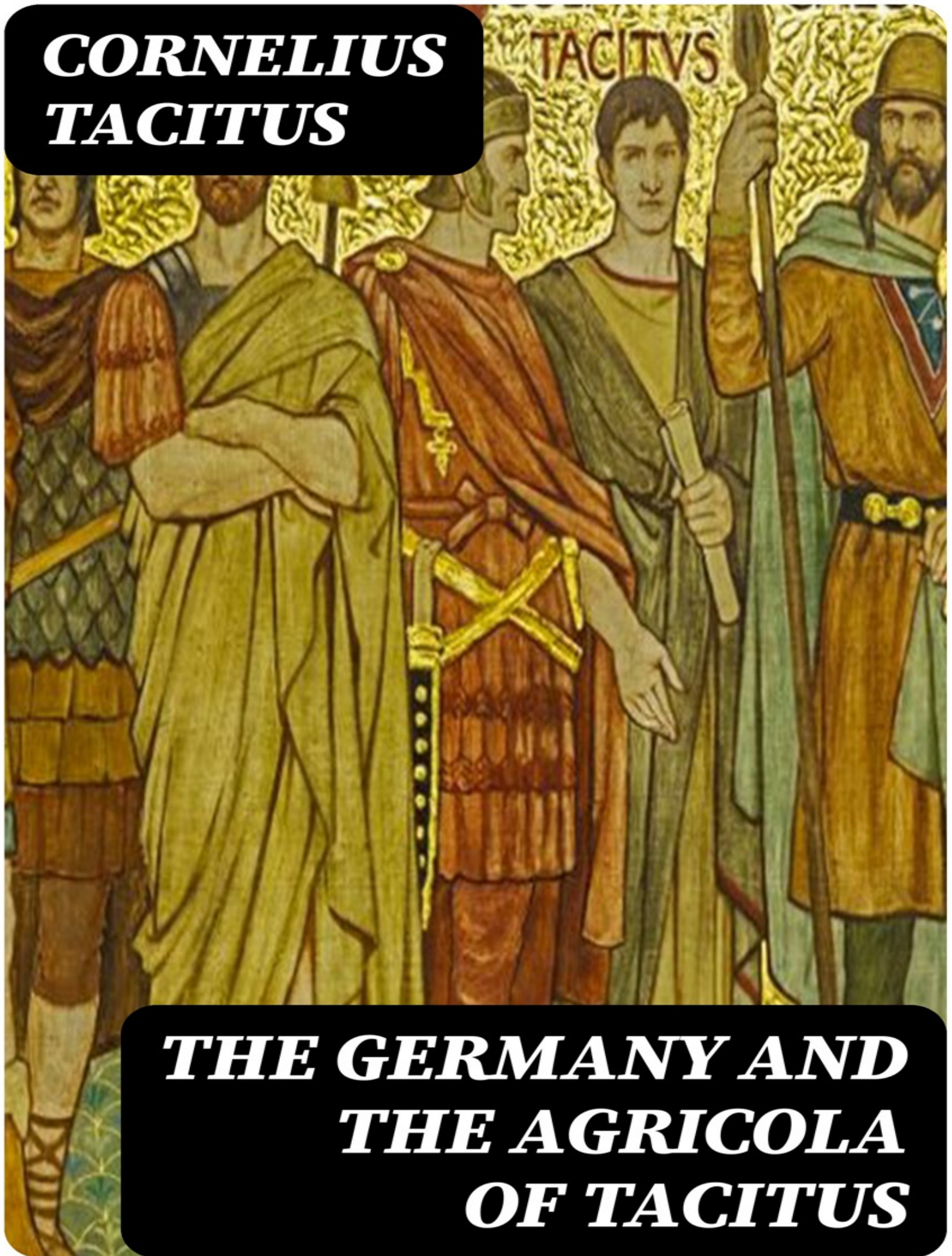


***CORNELIUS
TACITUS***



***THE GERMANY AND
THE AGRICOLA
OF TACITUS***

Cornelius Tacitus

The Germany and the Agricola of Tacitus

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

[INTRODUCTION.](#)

[THE LIFE OF CNAEUS JULIUS AGRICOLA.](#)

[A TREATISE ON THE SITUATION, MANNERS AND
INHABITANTS OF GERMANY.](#)

[THE LIFE OF CNAEUS JULIUS AGRICOLA](#)

With An Introduction By Edward Brooks, Jr.

FOOTNOTES:

INTRODUCTION.

[Table of Contents](#)

Very little is known concerning the life of Tacitus, the historian, except that which he tells us in his own writings and those incidents which are related of him by his contemporary, Pliny.

His full name was Caius Cornelius Tacitus. The date of his birth can only be arrived at by conjecture, and then only approximately. The younger Pliny speaks of him as *prope modum aequales*, about the same age. Pliny was born in 61. Tacitus, however, occupied the office of quaestor under Vespasian in 78 A.D., at which time he must, therefore, have

been at least twenty-five years of age. This would fix the date of his birth not later than 53 A.D. It is probable, therefore, that Tacitus was Pliny's senior by several years.

His parentage is also a matter of pure conjecture. The name Cornelius was a common one among the Romans, so that from it we can draw no inference. The fact that at an early age he occupied a prominent public office indicates that he was born of good family, and it is not impossible that his father was a certain Cornelius Tacitus, a Roman knight, who was procurator in Belgic Gaul, and whom the elder Pliny speaks of in his "Natural History."

Of the early life of Tacitus and the training which he underwent preparatory to those literary efforts which afterwards rendered him a conspicuous figure among Roman literateurs we know absolutely nothing.

Of the events of his life which transpired after he attained man's estate we know but little beyond that which he himself has recorded in his writings. He occupied a position of some eminence as a pleader at the Roman bar, and in 77 A.D. married the daughter of Julius Agricola, a humane and honorable citizen, who was at that time consul and was subsequently appointed governor of Britain. It is quite possible that this very advantageous alliance hastened his promotion to the office of quaestor under Vespasian.

Under Domitian, in 88, Tacitus was appointed one of fifteen commissioners to preside at the celebration of the secular games. In the same year he held the office of praetor, and was a member of one of the most select of the

old priestly colleges, in which a pre-requisite of membership was that a man should be born of a good family.

The following year he appears to have left Rome, and it is possible that he visited Germany and there obtained his knowledge and information respecting the manners and customs of its people which he makes the subject of his work known as the "Germany."

He did not return to Rome until 93, after an absence of four years, during which time his father-in-law died.

Some time between the years 93 and 97 he was elected to the senate, and during this time witnessed the judicial murders of many of Rome's best citizens which were perpetrated under the reign of Nero. Being himself a senator, he felt that he was not entirely guiltless of the crimes which were committed, and in his "Agricola" we find him giving expression to this feeling in the following words: "Our own hands dragged Helvidius to prison; ourselves were tortured with the spectacle of Mauricus and Rusticus, and sprinkled with the innocent blood of Senecio."

In 97 he was elected to the consulship as successor to Virginius Rufus, who died during his term of office and at whose funeral Tacitus delivered an oration in such a manner to cause Pliny to say, "The good fortune of Virginius was crowned by having the most eloquent of panegyrists."

In 99 Tacitus was appointed by the senate, together with Pliny, to conduct the prosecution against a great political offender, Marius Priscus, who, as proconsul of Africa, had corruptly mismanaged the affairs of his province. We have his associate's testimony that Tacitus made a most eloquent and dignified reply to the arguments which were urged on

the part of the defence. The prosecution was successful, and both Pliny and Tacitus were awarded a vote of thanks by the senate for their eminent and effectual efforts in the management of the case.

The exact date of Tacitus's death is not known, but in his "Annals" he seems to hint at the successful extension of the Emperor Trajan's eastern campaigns during the years 115 to 117, so that it is probable that he lived until the year 117.

Tacitus had a widespread reputation during his lifetime. On one occasion it is related of him that as he sat in the circus at the celebration of some games, a Roman knight asked him whether he was from Italy or the provinces. Tacitus answered, "You know me from your reading," to which the knight quickly replied, "Are you then Tacitus or Pliny?"

It is also worthy of notice that the Emperor Marcus Claudius Tacitus, who reigned during the third century, claimed to be descended from the historian, and directed that ten copies of his works should be published every year and placed in the public libraries.

The list of the extant works of Tacitus is as follows: the "Germany;" the "Life of Agricola;" the "Dialogue on Orators;" the "Histories," and the "Annals."

The following pages contain translations of the first two of these works. The "Germany," the full title of which is "Concerning the situation, manners and inhabitants of Germany," contains little of value from a historical standpoint. It describes with vividness the fierce and independent spirit of the German nations, with many suggestions as to the dangers in which the empire stood of

these people. The "Agricola" is a biographical sketch of the writer's father-in-law, who, as has been said, was a distinguished man and governor of Britain. It is one of the author's earliest works and was probably written shortly after the death of Domitian, in 96. This work, short as it is, has always been considered an admirable specimen of biography on account of its grace and dignity of expression. Whatever else it may be, it is a graceful and affectionate tribute to an upright and excellent man.

The "Dialogue on Orators" treats of the decay of eloquence under the empire. It is in the form of a dialogue, and represents two eminent members of the Roman bar discussing the change for the worse that had taken place in the early education of the Roman youth.

The "Histories" relate the events which transpired in Rome, beginning with the ascension of Galba, in 68, and ending with the reign of Domitian, in 97. Only four books and a fragment of a fifth have been preserved to us. These books contain an account of the brief reigns of Galba, Otho and Vitellius. The portion of the fifth book which has been preserved contains an interesting, though rather biased, account of the character, customs and religion of the Jewish nation viewed from the standpoint of a cultivated citizen of Rome.

The "Annals" contain the history of the empire from the death of Augustus, in 14, to the death of Nero, in 68, and originally consisted of sixteen books. Of these, only nine have come down to us in a state of entire preservation, and of the other seven we have but fragments of three. Out of a period of fifty-four years we have the history of about forty.

The style of Tacitus is, perhaps, noted principally for its conciseness. Tacitean brevity is proverbial, and many of his sentences are so brief, and leave so much for the student to read between the lines, that in order to be understood and appreciated the author must be read over and over again, lest the reader miss the point of some of his most excellent thoughts. Such an author presents grave, if not insuperable, difficulties to the translator, but notwithstanding this fact, the following pages cannot but impress the reader with the genius of Tacitus.

A TREATISE ON THE SITUATION, MANNERS AND INHABITANTS OF GERMANY. [1](#)

1. Germany [2](#) is separated from Gaul, Rhaetia, [3](#) and Pannonia, [4](#) by the rivers Rhine and Danube; from Sarmatia and Dacia, by mountains [5](#) and mutual dread. The rest is surrounded by an ocean, embracing broad promontories [6](#) and vast insular tracts, [7](#) in which our military expeditions have lately discovered various nations and kingdoms. The Rhine, issuing from the inaccessible and precipitous summit of the Rhaetic Alps, [8](#) bends gently to the west, and falls into the Northern Ocean. The Danube, poured from the easy and gently raised ridge of Mount Abnoba, [9](#) visits several nations

in its course, till at length it bursts out [10](#) by six channels [11](#) into the Pontic sea; a seventh is lost in marshes.

2. The people of Germany appear to me indigenous, [12](#) and free from intermixture with foreigners, either as settlers or casual visitants. For the emigrants of former ages performed their expeditions not by land, but by water; [13](#) and that immense, and, if I may so call it, hostile ocean, is rarely navigated by ships from our world. [14](#) Then, besides the danger of a boisterous and unknown sea, who would relinquish Asia, Africa, or Italy, for Germany, a land rude in its surface, rigorous in its climate, cheerless to every beholder and cultivator, except a native? In their ancient songs, [15](#) which are their only records or annals, they celebrate the god Tuisto, [16](#) sprung from the earth, and his son Mannus, as the fathers and founders of their race. To Mannus they ascribe three sons, from whose names [17](#) the people bordering on the ocean are called Ingaevones; those inhabiting the central parts, Herminones; the rest, Istaevones. Some, [18](#) however, assuming the licence of antiquity, affirm that there were more descendants of the god, from whom more appellations were derived; as those of the Marsi, [19](#) Gambrivii, [20](#) Suevi, [21](#) and Vandali; [22](#) and that these are the genuine and original names. [23](#) That of Germany, on the other hand, they assert to be a modern addition; [24](#) for that the people who first crossed the Rhine, and expelled the Gauls, and are now called Tungri, were then named Germans; which appellation of a particular tribe, not of a whole people, gradually prevailed; so that the title of Germans, first assumed by the victors in order to excite terror, was afterwards adopted by the nation in

general. 25 They have likewise the tradition of a Hercules 26 of their country, whose praises they sing before those of all other heroes as they advance to battle.

3. A peculiar kind of verses is also current among them, by the recital of which, termed "barding," 27 they stimulate their courage; while the sound itself serves as an augury of the event of the impending combat. For, according to the nature of the cry proceeding from the line, terror is inspired or felt: nor does it seem so much an articulate song, as the wild chorus of valor. A harsh, piercing note, and a broken roar, are the favorite tones; which they render more full and sonorous by applying their mouths to their shields. 28 Some conjecture that Ulysses, in the course of his long and fabulous wanderings, was driven into this ocean, and landed in Germany; and that Asciburgium, 29 a place situated on the Rhine, and at this day inhabited, was founded by him, and named *Askipurgion*. They pretend that an altar was formerly discovered here, consecrated to Ulysses, with the name of his father Laertes subjoined; and that certain monuments and tombs, inscribed with Greek characters, 30 are still extant upon the confines of Germany and Rhaetia. These allegations I shall neither attempt to confirm nor to refute: let every one believe concerning them as he is disposed.

4. I concur in opinion with those who deem the Germans never to have intermarried with other nations; but to be a race, pure, unmixed, and stamped with a distinct character. Hence a family likeness pervades the whole, though their numbers are so great: eyes stern and blue; ruddy hair; large bodies, 31 powerful in sudden exertions, but impatient of toil

and labor, least of all capable of sustaining thirst and heat. Cold and hunger they are accustomed by their climate and soil to endure.

5. The land, though varied to a considerable extent in its aspect, is yet universally shagged with forests, or deformed by marshes: moister on the side of Gaul, more bleak on the side of Norieum and Pannonia. ³² It is productive of grain, but unkindly to fruit-trees. ³³ It abounds in flocks and herds, but in general of a small breed. Even the beeve kind are destitute of their usual stateliness and dignity of head: ³⁴ they are, however, numerous, and form the most esteemed, and, indeed, the only species of wealth. Silver and gold the gods, I know not whether in their favor or anger, have denied to this country. ³⁵ Not that I would assert that no veins of these metals are generated in Germany; for who has made the search? The possession of them is not coveted by these people as it is by us. Vessels of silver are indeed to be seen among them, which have been presented to their ambassadors and chiefs; but they are held in no higher estimation than earthenware. The borderers, however, set a value on gold and silver for the purpose of commerce, and have learned to distinguish several kinds of our coin, some of which they prefer to others: the remoter inhabitants continue the more simple and ancient usage of bartering commodities. The money preferred by the Germans is the old and well-known species, such as the *Serrati* and *Bigati*. ³⁶ They are also better pleased with silver than gold; ³⁷ not on account of any fondness for that metal, but because the smaller money is more convenient in their common and petty merchandise.

6. Even iron is not plentiful 38 among them; 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*, 39) which has an iron blade, short and narrow, but so sharp and manageable, that, as occasion requires, they employ it either in close or distant fighting. 40 This spear and a shield are all the armor of the cavalry. The foot have, besides, missile weapons, several to each man, which they hurl to an immense distance. 41 They are either naked, 42 or lightly covered with a small mantle; and have no pride in equipage: their shields only are ornamented with the choicest colors. 43 Few are provided with a coat of mail; 44 and scarcely here and there one with a casque or helmet. 45 Their horses are neither remarkable for beauty nor swiftness, nor are they taught the various evolutions practised with us. The cavalry either bear down straight forwards, or wheel once to the right, in so compact a body that none is left behind the rest. Their principal strength, on the whole, consists in their infantry: hence in an engagement these are intermixed with the cavalry; 46 so Well accordant with the nature of equestrian combats is the agility of those foot soldiers, whom they select from the whole body of their youth, and place in the front of the line. Their number, too, is determined; a hundred from each canton: 47 and they are distinguished at home by a name expressive of this circumstance; so that what at first was only an appellation of number, becomes thenceforth a title of honor. Their line of battle is disposed in wedges. 48 To give ground, provided they rally again, is considered rather as a prudent strategem, than cowardice.

They carry off their slain even while the battle remains undecided. The greatest disgrace that can befall them is to have abandoned their shields. 49 A person branded with this ignominy is not permitted to join in their religious rites, or enter their assemblies; so that many, after escaping from battle, have put an end to their infamy by the halter.

7. In the election of kings they have regard to birth; in that of generals, 50 to valor. Their kings have not an absolute or unlimited power; 51 and their generals command less through the force of authority, than of example. If they are daring, adventurous, and conspicuous in action, they procure obedience from the admiration they inspire. None, however, but the priests 52 are permitted to judge offenders, to inflict bonds or stripes; so that chastisement appears not as an act of military discipline, but as the instigation of the god whom they suppose present with warriors. They also carry with them to battle certain images and standards taken from the sacred groves. 53 It is a principal incentive to their courage, that their squadrons and battalions are not formed by men fortuitously collected, but by the assemblage of families and clans. Their pledges also are near at hand; they have within hearing the yells of their women, and the cries of their children. These, too, are the most revered witnesses of each man's conduct, these his most liberal applauders. To their mothers and their wives they bring their wounds for relief, nor do these dread to count or to search out the gashes. The women also administer food and encouragement to those who are fighting.

8. 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, [54](#) and the pictures they have drawn of impending slavery, [55](#) a calamity which these people bear with more impatience for their women than themselves; so that those states who have been obliged to give among their hostages the daughters of noble families, are the most effectually bound to fidelity. [56](#) They even suppose somewhat of sanctity and prescience to be inherent in the female sex; and therefore neither despise their counsels, [57](#) nor disregard their responses. [58](#) We have beheld, in the reign of Vespasian, Veleda, [59](#) long revered by many as a deity. Aurima, moreover, and several others, [60](#) were formerly held in equal veneration, but not with a servile flattery, nor as though they made them goddesses. [61](#)

9. Of the gods, Mercury [62](#) is the principal object of their adoration; whom, on certain days, [63](#) they think it lawful to propitiate even with human victims. To Hercules and Mars [64](#) they offer the animals usually allotted for sacrifice. [65](#) Some of the Suevi also perform sacred rites to Isis. What was the cause and origin of this foreign worship, I have not been able to discover; further than that her being represented with the symbol of a galley, seems to indicate an imported religion. [66](#) They conceive it unworthy the grandeur of celestial beings to confine their deities within walls, or to represent them under a human similitude: [67](#) woods and groves are their temples; and they affix names of divinity to

that secret power, which they behold with the eye of adoration alone.

10. No people are more addicted to divination by omens and lots. The latter is performed in the following simple manner. They cut a twig ⁶⁸ from a fruit-tree, and divide it into small pieces, which, distinguished by certain marks, are thrown promiscuously upon a white garment. Then, the priest of the canton, if the occasion be public; if private, the master of the family; after an invocation of the gods, with his eyes lifted up to heaven, thrice takes out each piece, and, as they come up, interprets their signification according to the marks fixed upon them. If the result prove unfavorable, there is no more consultation on the same affair that day; if propitious, a confirmation by omens is still required. In common with other nations, the Germans are acquainted with the practice of auguring from the notes and flight of birds; but it is peculiar to them to derive admonitions and presages from horses also. ⁶⁹ Certain of these animals, milk-white, and untouched by earthly labor, are pastured at the public expense in the sacred woods and groves. These, yoked to a consecrated chariot, are accompanied by the priest, and king, or chief person of the community, who attentively observe their manner of neighing and snorting; and no kind of augury is more credited, not only among the populace, but among the nobles and priests. For the latter consider themselves as the ministers of the gods, and the horses, as privy to the divine will. Another kind of divination, by which they explore the event of momentous wars, is to oblige a prisoner, taken by any means whatsoever from the nation with whom they are

at variance, to fight with a picked man of their own, each with his own country's arms; and, according as the victory falls, they presage success to the one or to the other party.

70

11. On affairs of smaller moment, the chiefs consult; on those of greater importance, the whole community; yet with this circumstance, that what is referred to the decision of the people, is first maturely discussed by the chiefs. 71 They assemble, unless upon some sudden emergency, on stated days, either at the new or full moon, which they account the most auspicious season for beginning any enterprise. Nor do they, in their computation of time, reckon, like us, by the number of days, but of nights. In this way they arrange their business; in this way they fix their appointments; so that, with them, the night seems to lead the day. 72 An inconvenience produced by their liberty is, that they do not all assemble at a stated time, as if it were in obedience to a command; but two or three days are lost in the delays of convening. When they all think fit, 73 they sit down armed. 74 Silence is proclaimed by the priests, who have on this occasion a coercive power. Then the king, or chief, and such others as are conspicuous for age, birth, military renown, or eloquence, are heard; and gain attention rather from their ability to persuade, than their authority to command. If a proposal displease, the assembly reject it by an inarticulate murmur; if it prove agreeable, they clash their javelins; 75 for the most honorable expression of assent among them is the sound of arms.

12. Before this council, it is likewise allowed to exhibit accusations, and to prosecute capital offences. Punishments

are varied according to the nature of the crime. Traitors and deserters are hung upon trees: 76 cowards, dastards, 77 and those guilty of unnatural practices, 78 are suffocated in mud under a hurdle. 79 This difference of punishment has in view the principle, that villainy should be exposed while it is punished, but turpitude concealed. The penalties annexed to slighter offences 80 are also proportioned to the delinquency. The convicts are fined in horses and cattle: 81 part of the mulct 82 goes to the king or state; part to the injured person, or his relations. In the same assemblies chiefs 83 are also elected, to administer justice through the cantons and districts. A hundred companions, chosen from the people, attended upon each of them, to assist them as well with their advice as their authority.

13. The Germans transact no business, public or private, without being armed: 84 but it is not customary for any person to assume arms till 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 relation, equips the youth with a shield and javelin. 85 These are to them the manly gown; 86 this is the first honor conferred on youth: before this 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 signal services to the public; they are associated, however, with those of mature strength, who have already been declared capable of service; nor do they blush to be seen in the rank of companions. 87 For the state of companionship itself has its several degrees, determined by the judgment of him whom they follow; and there is a

great emulation among the companions, which shall possess the highest place in the favor of their chief; and among the chiefs, which shall excel in the number and valor of his companions. It is their dignity, their strength, to be always surrounded with a large body of select youth, an ornament in peace, a bulwark in war. And not in his own country alone, but among the neighboring states, the fame and glory of each chief consists in being distinguished for the number and bravery of his companions. Such chiefs are courted by embassies; distinguished by presents; and often by their reputation alone decide a war.

14. In the field of battle, it is disgraceful for the chief to be surpassed in valor; 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. ⁸⁸ To aid, to protect him; to place their own gallant actions to the account of his glory, is their first and most sacred engagement. The chiefs fight for victory; the companions for their chief. If their native country be long sunk in peace and inaction, many of the young nobles repair to some other state then engaged in war. For, besides that repose is unwelcome to their race, and toils and perils afford them a better opportunity of distinguishing themselves; they are unable, without war and violence, to maintain a large train of followers. The companion requires from the liberality of his chief, the warlike steed, the bloody and conquering spear: and in place of pay, he expects to be supplied with a table, homely indeed, but plentiful. ⁸⁹ The funds for this munificence must be found in war and rapine; nor are they so easily persuaded to cultivate the earth, and

await the produce of the seasons, as to challenge the foe, and expose themselves to wounds; nay, they even think it base and spiritless to earn by sweat what they might purchase with blood.

15. During the intervals of war, they pass their time less in hunting than in a sluggish repose, 90 divided between sleep and the table. All the bravest of the warriors, committing the care of the house, the family affairs, and the lands, to the women, old men, and weaker part of the domestics, stupefy themselves in inaction: so wonderful is the contrast presented by nature, that the same persons love indolence, and hate tranquillity! 91 It is customary for the several states to present, by voluntary and individual contributions, 92 cattle or grain 93 to their chiefs; which are accepted as honorary gifts, while they serve as necessary supplies. 94 They are peculiarly pleased with presents from neighboring nations, offered not only by individuals, but by the community at large; such as fine horses, heavy armor, rich housings, and gold chains. We have now taught them also to accept of money. 95

16. It is well known that none of the German nations inhabit cities; 96 or even admit of contiguous settlements. They dwell scattered and separate, as a spring, a meadow, or a grove may chance to invite them. Their villages are laid out, not like ours in rows of adjoining buildings; but every one surrounds his house with a vacant space, 97 either by way of security against fire, 98 or through ignorance of the art of building. For, indeed, they are unacquainted with the use of mortar and tiles; and for every purpose employ rude unshapen timber, fashioned with no regard to pleasing the

eye. They bestow more than ordinary pains in coating certain parts of their buildings with a kind of earth, so pure and shining that it gives the appearance of painting. They also dig subterraneous caves, [99](#) and cover them over with a great quantity of dung. These they use as winter-retreats, and granaries; for they preserve a moderate temperature; and upon an invasion, when the open country is plundered, these recesses remain unviolated, either because the enemy is ignorant of them, or because he will not trouble himself with the search. [100](#)

17. The clothing common to all is a sagum [101](#) fastened by a clasp, or, in want of that, a thorn. With no other covering, they pass whole days on the hearth, before the fire. The more wealthy are distinguished by a vest, not flowing loose, like those of the Sarmatians and Parthians, but girt close, and exhibiting the shape of every limb. They also wear the skins of beasts, which the people near the borders are less curious in selecting or preparing than the more remote inhabitants, who cannot by commerce procure other clothing. These make choice of particular skins, which they variegate with spots, and strips of the furs of marine animals, [102](#) the produce of the exterior ocean, and seas to us unknown. [103](#) The dress of the women does not differ from that of the men; except that they more frequently wear linen, [104](#) which they stain with purple; [105](#) and do not lengthen their upper garment into sleeves, but leave exposed the whole arm, and part of the breast.

18. The matrimonial bond is, nevertheless, strict and severe among them; nor is there anything in their manners more commendable than this. [106](#) Almost singly among the