

*the*  
**Early Germans**

*Second Edition*

# The Peoples of Europe

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*the*  
**Early Germans**

Malcolm Todd

Second Edition

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E. A. Thompson  
D. A. Bullough  
*Teachers and Friends*



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# Foreword to the Second Edition

A book written more than a decade ago and now appearing in a revised edition, after several reprints and four translations, requires some defence. Since the publication of the first edition in 1992 there have been many advances in the study of this extensive field. These include not only major accessions to knowledge, but also new approaches to what is already known, in part in response to radical political change in modern Europe, after 1989 in particular. Other, more intellectual forces have been at work, opening up debate on the relations between the Roman world and the northern peoples, and on the complex subject of migration. Inevitably, migration in its many forms is prominent in this volume, as is the equally complex field of ethnicity, which has received much attention over recent years. Discussion of both these subjects has been to the fore over the past decade and more. Among many major contributions there may be mentioned those of Herwig Wolfram, Patrick Périn, Michel Kasanski, Claus von Carnap-Bornheim, Peter Heather and Ian Wood. The important *Romanisierung* project organized by the Römisch–Germanische Kommission has opened numerous avenues of research. Behind these advances the onward march of the reference work, Hoops' *Reallexicon* has continued with general benefit.

In revising the book I must acknowledge a debt to the incomparable resources of the Library of the Römisch–Germanische Kommission and the kindness of its expert staff. My debt to the staff of Blackwell Publishing is as great. In particular, I must thank Tessa Harvey, Angela Cohen and Helen Lawton for all their help, advice and support, and Sandra Raphael for her expertise in copy-editing a mongrel text.

February 2004



# Foreword to the First Edition

The emergence and early history of the Germanic peoples have never been a central concern of British historians. Even those who have written on Anglo-Saxon England have surprisingly rarely sought to relate the Germans who settled in England to the larger family of which they were a small but significant branch. There are, of course, exceptions, among whom Michael Wallace-Hadrill and Edward Thompson immediately come to mind. And a growing school of younger scholars is beginning to provide redress for long neglect. This book is offered as a general introduction to a huge and complex field of study, the literature of which is daunting in its mass. In a single small volume many major subjects can be only briefly touched on, while others have been excluded only for want of space.

Given the nature of the historical evidence, it is clearly impossible to treat the early Germans without close reference to the Roman world and its impact upon them. But there was also significant impact on the Roman world by the Germanic peoples, and not merely after the major migrations. This, too, has been a major concern, though the subject demands attention at far greater length. All books are acts of larceny. Those whose work I have learnt from and converted to my own use are too numerous to receive individual acknowledgement. But my debt to Edward Thompson, which has accumulated over nearly three decades, is too great to be passed over in silence.

# Abbreviations

*Acta Arch.*

*Acta Arch. Hungarica*

*Arch. Belgica*

*Bericht RGK*

BROB

JRGZM

MGH. AA

*Präh. Zeitschrift*

*Acta Archaeologica.*

*Acta Archaeologia Hungarica.*

*Archaeologia Belgica.*

*Bericht der Römisch–Germanischen  
Kommission.*

*Berichten van de Rijksdienst  
voor het Oudheidkundig  
Bodemonderzoek.*

*Jahrbuch des Römisch–  
Germanischen Zentralmuseums  
Mainz.*

*Monumenta Germaniae*

*Historica. Auctores*

*Antiquissimi*

*Prähistorische Zeitschrift.*



# Introduction: Rediscovery

## The Germani<sup>1</sup>

The peoples known to the Classical Mediterranean world as the Germani were relative latecomers to history. Mediterranean writers knew little of the peoples who inhabited north and central Europe before the second century BC. The earliest surviving references to those peoples make no mention of Germans. In the fifth century BC, the Greek world was conscious of a major barbarian people in west and central Europe; it called them Keltoi (Celts). Herodotus relates that they were the most westerly of European peoples and that the Danube had its source in their territory. He also knew about the nomadic Scythians on the steppes of western Russia, far more indeed than he knew about the Celts. Hekataeus also mentions Celts, in the eastern Alpine region known as Noricum (now mainly occupied by Austria). But neither Herodotus nor Hekataeus refers to Germans, or other major barbarian peoples. A century later, Ephorus named the four great barbarian nations known to him: Celts, Scythians, Persians and Libyans. By the late fourth century BC, knowledge of the remoter parts of Europe was growing. At some date, probably about 320, Pytheas of Marseilles sailed around Britain and along the north European coast, possibly rounding Jutland and entering the western Baltic. His journey was so astonishing an achievement that contemporary and later writers refused to believe his account, and what survives of it amounts only to quotations by others.<sup>2</sup> Much of what Pytheas is said to have recorded is geographically reliable, though

1 The literature on the origins and early development of the early Germanic peoples is mountainous and still increasing. Footnotes to this volume have been kept to a modest number. It is hoped that the bibliography will enable the reader to explore the field further.

2 B. Cunliffe, *The Extraordinary Voyage of Pytheas the Greek* (London 2001).

it is scanty on the northern European mainland. He is chiefly of interest to us because he may have been the first Mediterranean observer to distinguish Germanoi from Keltoi.

In the two centuries after Pytheas' voyage, remarkably little was added to the canon of information on the northern peoples. The first clear indication of peoples who were distinct from the Celts and who came from far to the north of them was registered late in the second century BC, when a huge and miscellaneous throng of northerners, including Cimbri and Teutones, swept southward and endangered the northern frontiers of the Roman world. At about this time, in his *Histories*, Poseidonius of Apamea distinguished the Germans from the Celts and the Scythians. It is known that Poseidonius visited Gaul and northern Italy, but he clearly had no first-hand knowledge of lands and peoples further north. His sources can only be guessed at, but we should not assume that they were outstandingly well informed. Nor should we assume that what Poseidonius wrote about the Germans had a powerful influence on later writers such as Caesar and Strabo, as many modern scholars have done. That his information was used is certain, but by the first century BC there will have been other sources for the northern peoples. A generation after Poseidonius, Rome was to come into contact with the western Germans, thus inaugurating a long relationship which would lead ultimately to the transformation of Europe.

Roman arms were first carried to the Rhine, and, in two brief campaigns, beyond it by Julius Caesar. His *Commentaries* on his conquests in Gaul provide us with our first sight of material conditions among the Germans. Caesar's sketch of Germanic society and political organization is executed with a few bold strokes. Though it must be accepted as the earliest coherent picture we possess of Germanic society, it is clearly based upon knowledge of a relatively small part of Germania, that part which Caesar himself saw in the valley of the Rhine and immediately to the east of it. The tribes he mentions are those established at that date in the broken terrain within 100 kilometres of the Rhine (the Suebi, Tencteri, Usipetes) or on the river itself (Ubi, Menapii). No information about the peoples of the interior had reached him and it is difficult to see what sources could have supplied such information at that date. Of the German tribes which Caesar describes the largest and most powerful were the Suebi. For some time before Caesar's arrival in Gaul they had been turning their attentions westward, tending to dominate smaller tribes close to the Rhine. Some adventurous elements from the Suebi, led by Ariovistus, had indeed established themselves west of the Rhine,

having been invited in as mercenaries by the Sequani, and it was this German presence in eastern Gaul which gave Caesar a useful pretext for intervening in the affairs of the Gaulish tribes. For this westward drive of the Suebi there is other evidence, both archaeological and philological.

Caesar's picture of the Germans is skilfully drawn. He carefully emphasized the Rhine valley as a divide between the Gauls to the west and the Germans to the east. According to Caesar, these peoples were very different from each other. The Gauls, though tough and warlike, were amenable to the attractions of orderly, civilized life. The Germans on the other hand were primitive, following a life-style which seemed to Romans even more savage than that of other barbarians and one that would never be softened by contact with civilized men. Worse than that, they posed a serious threat to the security of Gaul. The Suebi were poised to cross the Rhine in great strength, following the earlier crossing by an enormous host led by Ariovistus. If this menace was not confronted and beaten off, an invasion of the Roman provinces, perhaps even of Italy itself, could not be prevented. The memory of the invasion of the Cimbri and Teutones had not faded and Caesar could appeal to deep-seated fears in order to justify his own operations in Gaul. Caesar's motives have received a great deal of attention. Obviously his own purposes were to the fore and they did not include dispassionate ethnographical study. But he may well have been correct in seeing that the peoples east of the Rhine were likely to seek land on which to settle in Gaul. The southward thrust of the Cimbri and others was only one of several major movements of population in central and western Europe in this period, as competition increased for good land and other natural resources. Before Caesar entered Gaul, migrants had passed into northern Gaul from across the Rhine, while further east there were major shifts of population in Noricum and Bohemia. These movements had been proceeding for some time before the mid-first century BC. The new component of the scene was the expansion of Roman power.

Strabo, writing in the reigns of Augustus and Tiberius, not surprisingly knew more than Caesar about the Germans east of the Rhine. Like Caesar, he saw the Suebi as the strongest and most dangerous power and he records that they had already driven several groups across the river into Gaul. The Cimbri also interested him, partly no doubt because of their famous raid a century earlier and also because their gift of a revered cauldron to Augustus, presumably reciprocated by a Roman offering, had been recently talked about in Rome. Strabo claims a fair knowledge of the peoples up to the Elbe, but specifically says that those areas beyond

the Elbe and northwards to the ocean (the Baltic) were unknown to the Romans. About the central Germanic regions, in the upper Elbe basin, he is vague. At the very time that Strabo was writing, however, knowledge was advancing as Roman arms were advancing to the Elbe and into Bohemia, and as other contacts with the Germans were being established.

There is a clear echo of the fear and indeed terror which the Germans aroused at this time in the writing of Velleius Paterculus, who had served as an officer in the army sent to the Rhine frontier after the massive defeat of Varus in AD 9. To Velleius the Germans were inhuman savages, *feri*, resembling men only in their form and in possessing the power of speech. Such people could not be governed by laws, much less taught the civilized arts. This is an extreme view, expressed by someone who encountered Germans at a time of acute crisis. Yet it is echoed in other sources at a much later date and reveals not only how dire a threat the Germans were seen to be, but how terrifying these tall, ferocious northerners were, even to soldiers in the best army of the ancient world.

A particularly unfortunate loss to us is that of the *Bella Germaniae* of the elder Pliny, an account of Roman campaigns against the Germans down to the mid-first century AD. Pliny had served on both the lower and the upper Rhine, and his inexhaustible curiosity about every subject undoubtedly would have led him to record much about Germanic life and institutions. It is probable that a number of the statements in Tacitus' *Germania* which seem to be drawn from the life were supplied by Pliny's work; for example the story of the altar dedicated by Ulysses on the Rhine, and the memorial tumuli inscribed in Greek. After Pliny, we know of no work of literature which dealt with the Germans until the publication of Tacitus' *Germania* in AD 98. But during this period primary sources of knowledge about northern Europe increased enormously. Roman commanders frequently produced memoirs of their campaigns, along the line of Caesar's *Commentaries*, and these circulated in Roman literary circles, even if they were never published. Diplomatic exchanges certainly brought some German leaders to Rome and, doubtless, Roman emissaries to barbarian courts. Above all else, traders greatly extended their activities among the barbarians, on occasion with official engagement, and their intelligence about the barbarian world in all its aspects is likely to have been more rounded than that gathered by the military men (see below, p. 88). Such reports must have been of particular interest for what they provided about the peoples of the north and the east, with whom official contacts were sparse.

The *Germania* of Tacitus has been recognized as the most significant literary evidence for the early Germanic peoples since the Renaissance,

but the subject is much more complex than scholars and commentators appreciated until the later twentieth century. The ancient writers who referred to *Germanoi* in Greek and *Germani* in Latin did so for the most part without first-hand knowledge of these peoples and usually wrote within a well defined ethnographic tradition, the bounds of which were determined not only (or principally) by dispassionate academic enquiry but also by moral and cultural judgement. From the fifteenth century onward, the Germanic peoples described by Tacitus have been variously defined, by language, by culture and by moral comparisons with the inhabitants of the Mediterranean world. In central and northern Europe, identification of the ancient Germanic peoples and the contemporary Germans seems to have begun by the late fifteenth century in the decades after the rediscovery of the *Germania* of Tacitus. Philologists added their weight to this notion and by the later eighteenth century archaeologists weighed in with material evidence from the ground. The steady rise of national feeling from the early nineteenth century onwards provided further impetus in both political and academic circles. By the time of the unification of the German states in 1870, the prehistory and early history of the Germans appeared to be firmly founded.

Among Classical texts which treat the Germanic peoples, pre-eminent is of course the *Germania* of Tacitus, which appeared in AD 98.<sup>3</sup> Something of its influence must come in for assessment before its contents are put to use. First of all, Tacitus was writing in this, one of his earliest works, in a tradition which ultimately reached back to Herodotus in the fifth century BC. Several later Greek writers added to the canon of peoples who lay outside the Mediterranean orbit. Of these, Poseidonius is widely regarded, probably correctly, as the most fully informed on the peoples encountered by Rome in western Europe. He was a Syrian Greek who studied in Athens, embraced Stoic philosophy and wrote on a huge number of subjects between about 110 and 50 BC. Most of his corpus is lost, but surviving fragments attest his deep interest in ethnology. He may have been the first writer to make a clear distinction between Celts and Germans; and his conclusion was taken up and perhaps embellished by Julius Caesar in pursuit of his own political ends.<sup>4</sup> Caesar did not

3 E. Norden, *Die germanische Urgeschichte in Tacitus' Germania* (4th edn, Darmstadt 1959) is still influential on the influence of the Poseidonian tradition, but the case is overstated.

4 R. Hachmann, G. Kossack and H. Kuhn, *Völker zwischen Kelten und Germanen* (Neumünster 1962) drew attention to the false distinction between Celts and Germans on the Rhine. See now, H. Ament, 'Der Rhein und die Ethnogenese der Germanen', *Präh. Zeitschrift* 59 (1984), 37–51; H. Beck, *Germanenprobleme in heutiger Sicht* (Berlin 1986).

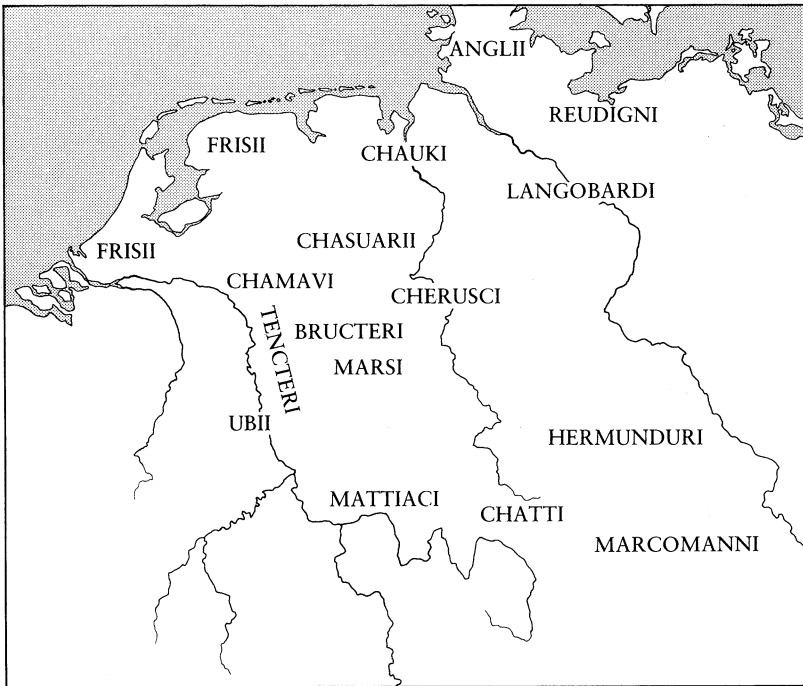
penetrate far to the east of the Rhine so that his knowledge of tribes in the interior was limited.<sup>5</sup> He is unlikely to have had time and inclination for ethnographic study and will have relied upon the reports of Poseidonius and others.<sup>6</sup> After Caesar, the fullest accounts of relations between Rome and the peoples east of the Rhine was probably contained in the Elder Pliny's *German Wars*, compiled in the 60s and 70s AD but now sadly lost. It is virtually certain that Pliny's work was known to Tacitus and used by him in compiling his *Germania*.

This short monograph was the most influential source for the early Germanic peoples from the Renaissance onward, truly a Golden Book. The text had re-emerged by the ninth century and, in the 860s, a monk at Fulda could quote verbatim from it. The *Germania* and other shorter works of Tacitus were probably copied at Fulda about this time. But the manuscript did not stir great interest, either because it was not made widely known or because the Germans described by Tacitus were not seen as connected to contemporary peoples. The geographical concept of Germania was more widely applied than the concept Germani. For the following 500 years, the *Germania* of Tacitus seems to have been lost to scholarship. In 1425 Poggio Bracciolini heard of manuscripts of Tacitus in the library of the monastery of Hersfeld, near Fulda. One of these included the shorter works of Tacitus. In 1451 an emissary of Pope Nicholas V brought back to Rome a manuscript which was fairly certainly that of which Poggio had heard. Copies were made in the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries; upon these our knowledge of Tacitus' *Germania* is largely based.

The first printing of the *Germania* in central Europe, at Nuremberg in 1473–4, made little impact, though individual scholars turned it to patriotic uses. The next phase of scholarly interpretation was opened by Beatus Rhenanus in 1519. He not only superintended two editions of the text, but to the earlier of these he added the first commentary on the *Germania*, in which he attempted to identify the location of the peoples mentioned by Tacitus and to link them with population groups in early modern Germany. Beatus was far more objective than earlier scholars, in particular avoiding overt nationalist interpretation, though he could not avoid all linkage between the tribes mentioned by Tacitus and the peoples of Beatus' own day. But he was not guilty of following a politi-

5 R. Nierhaus, *Das swebische Gräberfeld von Diersheim* (Berlin 1966) for settlement on the upper Rhine.

6 On Caesar's contribution to the definition of the Germani, J. B. Rives, *Tacitus' Germania* (Oxford 1999) and C. Trzaska-Richter, *Furor teutonicus: Das Germanenbild in Politik und Propaganda von den Anfängen bis zum 2. Jahrhunderts n. Chr.* (Trier 1991).



**Figure 1** The western Germanic peoples, c. AD 200.

cal agenda and his work marks a turning point in the study of the early Germans.

The rediscovery of the *Germania* in the late fifteenth century was a decisive event in the study of the ancient Germanic peoples. Renaissance scholarship endowed Roman literary texts with outstanding authority, as well as making them more widely available. At the same time, a rise in German national feeling led to heightened interest in ancient texts which illuminated the Germanic past. Caesar's account had long been known. The *Germania* offered much more and was used to cement a link between the Germans of Tacitus and the Germans of the early modern period (Rives 1999, 67–71). From about 1500 onward the *Germania* was rarely far from serious discussion of German national identity, German history and even German religion. Fresh impetus was given to it in the nineteenth century and, of course, the racial purity, valour and integrity of the Germans as portrayed by Tacitus had immense appeal to the National Socialist hierarchy in the 1920s and 1930s.

After the *Germania*, the sources available to us are neither extensive nor impressive until late Antiquity. From the mid-second century we have the *Geography* of Ptolemy, an astronomer-geographer who worked in Alexandria. His *Geography* relied heavily on first-century sources, largely lists of places, geographical features and tribes, latitude and longitude being provided for the places. The status of the individual sites given by Ptolemy is not always clear. Some were probably major settlements, others may be market centres or river crossings which Roman merchants had had reason to make notes of. Some of his names are garbled and some places are obviously wrongly positioned, so that an accurate map cannot be reconstructed from the information he gives. He does, however, record sixty-nine tribes and ninety-five places, many of them mentioned by no other source, along with major rivers and other natural features. Inadequate as the *Geography* is, it is the only extensive source for the geography of northern Europe for the centuries between the *Germania* of Tacitus and the changed world of the fourth century.

From late Antiquity, no extensive study of the Germanic peoples has survived, if it was ever written.<sup>7</sup> Ammianus Marcellinus is our best witness for the Franks and Alamanni of the fourth century, but mainly as opponents of Rome. No single writer treats the migrating peoples in any coherent way and some on whom our reliance must rest *faute de mieux*, such as Zosimus and Jordanes, are often infuriating. There are far more rewarding sources on the later Germanic kingdoms, such as Cassiodorus on Theoderic's Italy, Hydatius on Spain, Gregory of Tours on the Franks and Paul the Deacon on the Lombards. But even these writers leave many subjects untouched and others in a heavy shadow which we cannot completely disperse.

## Origins

Who, then, were the Germani; where and when did they originate? The first point to be made is that they had no collective consciousness of themselves as a separate people, nation or group of tribes. There is no evidence that they called themselves 'Germani' or their land 'Germania'. These were terms applied by writers in the Mediterranean world and they can be traced with certainty no further back than the time of Poseidonius. The meaning and origin of the word 'Germanus' are

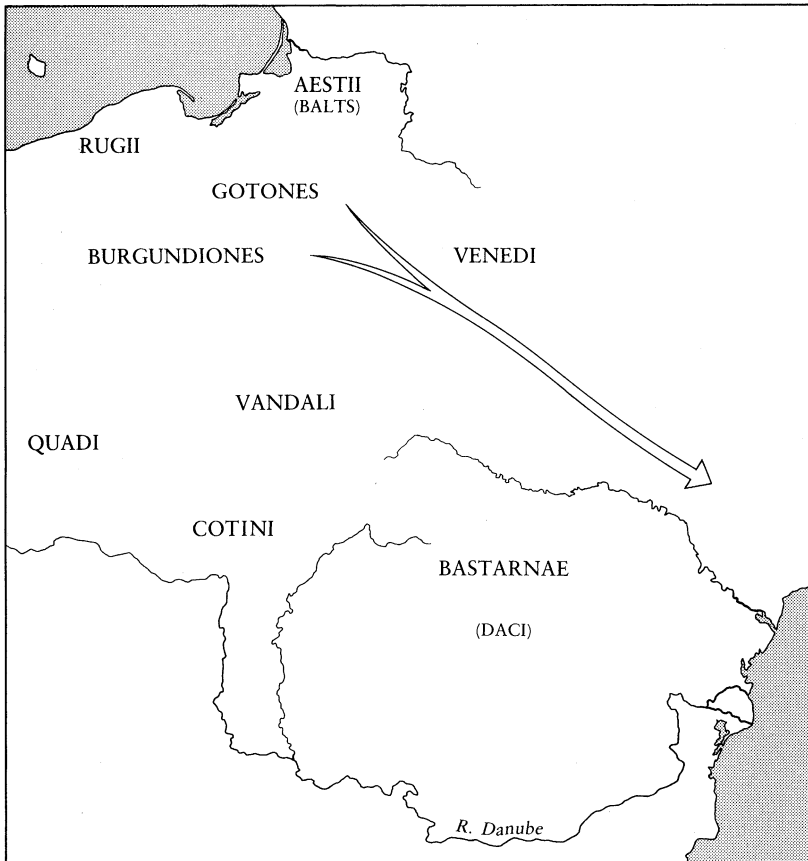
<sup>7</sup> On the major fourth-century sources, J. Matthews, *The Roman Empire of Ammianus Marcellinus* (London 1988), 306–18.



unknown, but it is certain that the term was not in general use among the early Germans themselves. By the time of Julius Caesar in the mid-first century BC, 'Germanus' and its derivatives were well established and Caesar himself clearly thought that no further explanation was required. The tradition which was current when Tacitus collected information for the *Germania* in the late first century AD held that the name was originally borne by a group of people who crossed the Rhine from the East, drove out the Gauls from a region in eastern Belgium and settled there, later becoming known as the Tungri. What had originally been the name of a single tribe became the name by which all the related peoples were known. There is no evidence which goes to support this derivation of the name 'Germani', though there is nothing inherently implausible in Tacitus' account. The Roman name for the Greeks, 'Graeci', comes from the little tribe of the Grai, and the name applied by the French to the Germans, 'Allemands', from a single Germanic group, the Alamanni. The linguistic origins of 'Germani' are also obscure. It is not even clear which language supplied the name. Celtic, Germanic, Latin and Illyrian have all had their supporters. All that is reasonably certain is that a member of a German tribe, when asked about his or her affiliations, would have answered 'Langobard', 'Vandal', 'Frisian' or 'Goth', not 'Germanus'.

Modern approaches to the problem of German origins have to a large extent been governed by shifts in political feeling since the mid-nineteenth century. Origins as far back as human activities could be traced were sought in the glow of German nationalism after 1848. Before the end of the century the idea of an ancient and inviolate *Germanentum* had emerged. The origins of the *Volk* were traced back to the remotest prehistoric periods and subsequent influence from outside was seen as minimal. It was easy for the National-Socialist party to incorporate this view of the German past into its political programme. After 1945 there came an inevitable reaction against such excesses. Both the exclusivity and the antiquity of the Germanic peoples came under scrutiny, at the same time as the ability of archaeological evidence alone to give definition to ethnic blocs was being increasingly called into question. In the early 1960s, Germanic origins came under intense examination from linguists as well as archaeologists.<sup>8</sup> Long-held notions about the separateness of the Germans were seriously challenged. The spread of Germanic peoples from a northern heart-land was brought into question and the creation of a Germanic identity was linked with the advance

8 R. Hachmann et al., *Völker zwischen Kelten und Germanen*.



**Figure 2** The eastern Germanic peoples, c. AD 100.

of Roman power to the Rhine and Danube. The reaction against extreme nationalism had gone too far. In the 1980s the pendulum began a backward swing. Once again, arguments which trace the origin of the Germanic peoples to a remote period of European prehistory, to the later Neolithic, are heard. Lothar Kilian in two important studies has presented a strongly argued case, based partly on elements of continuity in archaeological cultures, partly on linguistic evidence.<sup>9</sup> The case does not

<sup>9</sup> L. Kilian, *Zum Ursprung der Indogermanen* (Bonn 1983); *Zum Ursprung der Germanen* (Bonn 1988).

carry conviction. It is possible to accept that the ancestors of the Germans known to our earliest surviving historical accounts can be traced back to the mid-first millennium BC, the period of the Jastorf culture, on the north German plain between Elbe and Oder, and the Harpstedt culture, in north-west Germany and Holland. To this same period philologists attribute certain sound-changes which were significant in the formation of proto-Germanic. But to what extent the progenitors of these cultures were 'Germanic' or 'proto-Germanic' is much more problematic. It is true that there is a general impression of cultural stability in northern Germany and southern Scandinavia from the late Neolithic onward. But how securely this can be regarded as indicating an ethnic continuum is still, at best, uncertain. The Germans were first certainly distinguished from the other peoples of northern Europe in the early first century BC, or possibly late in the fourth century. It is stretching the evidence to breaking-point to trace their ethnogenesis back more than 2000 years.

## Languages

It might be thought that the early Germanic languages should throw light on the ethnogenesis of their speakers, but this is a field fraught with extreme difficulty. The earliest relics of Germanic languages are few and their date is far from certain. As the early Germans left no written records, the linguist must depend upon comparative reconstruction. It is generally agreed that proto-Germanic was one branch of the Indo-European family of languages and was thus related to early Greek, Italic, Iranian and their cognates. The earliest Germanic language of which there are substantial and reliable remains is Gothic, thanks to the translation of the Bible into Gothic by the bishop Ulfila in the earlier fourth century, preserved in fragmentary form in manuscripts of the sixth century. Contemporary languages spoken by other Germanic groups are represented only by personal names, which tell us little. A still earlier stratum resides in the runic inscriptions of northern Germania, the earliest of which date to the second century AD and which extend in Scandinavia to the early modern period. This system of writing records mainly personal names and epithets which give little general information. Other sources of the Roman Iron Age are very limited but suggest that there was little separation of dialects before AD 500. Thereafter, there is little sign of divergence for several centuries. Before AD 500 the west German dialects were more varied than those in the

east, perhaps because they were more exposed to external influences. The Scandinavian dialects, as revealed by runic inscriptions, show increasing variation from the migration period onward until they formed the basis for an important literary culture which emerged from the thirteenth century.

The languages spoken by the early Germanic peoples formed part of that large group known generally as the Indo-European (earlier Indo-Germanic), which also includes Celtic, Greek, Italic, Illyrian, Hittite, Thracian, Iranian, Sanskrit, Slav and Baltic. An original Indo-European language, spoken by a distinct population living in a definable area, is not now something which all linguistic scholars or archaeologists would insist on, but an ancestral language from which many historically attested languages have plainly descended is still a fundamental concept. The original form of that language, however, is accepted to be beyond complete reconstruction. The Indo-European languages that are most fully known are remote from the common ancestor, and those languages belong to very different stages of linguistic development. The earliest written records for individual languages are spaced out over many centuries: Mycenaean Greek from 1200 BC, Sanskrit from 1000 BC, Latin from 300 BC, Celtic and Germanic only from the first centuries AD. The earliest literary tradition for a Germanic language, Gothic, begins only in the fourth century AD and for the other members of the Germanic group, such as Old English and Old High German, in the eighth century. With material like this, it will be clear that we can reconstruct no more than the framework of the early forms of German. About many stages in the development of the various branches there can never be unqualified certainty.

Although we cannot locate the *Urheimat* of Indo-European speakers with any precision,<sup>10</sup> the broad sweep of Europe from the western steppes to the north German plain – a reasonably continuous ecological region – may be plausibly identified as a principal homeland of that population. Archaeology is of no help here, despite many efforts to define cultures which could be termed Indo-European. So far as proto-Germanic is concerned, the most that can be accepted is that this language emerged in northern Europe between 2500 and 1000 BC, while further south Celtic, Italic, Venetic and Illyrian were also developing. How unified that language was is not at all clear, and the enormous geographical spread of its speakers must be recognized. It is probably safer to see proto-

10 For two discussions: C. Renfrew, *Archaeology and Language* (London 1987); J. P. Mallory, *In Search of the Indo-Europeans* (London 1988).

Germanic as a linguistic complex rather than a unified language existing at one time.

When individual languages are well documented, we find several divisions of Germanic: a northern form, several western dialects, an eastern language which in its principal form was Gothic. The northern branch, not recorded in any detail before the twelfth century, gave rise to the Scandinavian languages in due course, later to be separated by political and cultural circumstances. The western languages, emerging between the Elbe and the Rhine, are of particular interest to us as they included the ancestral form of English, as well as Frisian, Old Saxon and High German. Best known of all the early languages is Gothic, known to us through a number of literary works and fragments, the most important of which is the Gothic translation of the Bible undertaken by the Visigothic bishop Ulfila in the fourth century (see below, p. 119), of which several sixth-century manuscripts exist in part. The most important of these is the magnificent *Codex Argenteus* in Uppsala, on purple vellum with silver and gold letters. Of considerable use, though much later in date, are two Gothic alphabets and groups of Gothic words derived from St Luke's Gospel, and parts of a Visigothic calendar from the fourth century, when the Visigoths were on the lower Danube. Gothic itself survived as a spoken language in the Crimea for centuries after it disappeared elsewhere; certain words and phrases were brought back from there in the sixteenth century.

Information on the early Germanic languages remains thin until the migration period. The earliest known inscription in a Germanic language occurs on a bronze helmet, one of a group of twenty-four, found at Negau in southern Austria. The date and significance of this unusual cache of helmets have been much discussed, but many uncertainties remain. The inscription reads from right to left HARIXASTITEIVA/// IP (or IL) in a North Italic alphabet which had gone out of use by the beginning of the Christian era and probably before the first century BC. The latest date for the addition of this inscription to the Negau helmet would seem to be the early first century BC, at which time German-speaking auxiliaries might have been drawn into service in the Roman army in the north Italic regions. Many interpretations have been offered as to the meaning of the inscription. The most convincing seems to be that which sees it as an invocation of Teiva, a Germanic god of war, who is given the epithet Harigasti, 'guest of the army'. Others have seen Harigasti as a personal name and the inscription as a whole as a mark of ownership. This ignores the exceptional nature of this prominent inscription on a helmet at this date. An invocation of divine protection for the wearer