

Blažek, Václav

Germanic peoples at the turn of prehistory and history

In: Blažek, Václav. *Old Germanic languages : historical and grammatical survey*. First published Brno: Masaryk University Press, 2023, pp. 8-13

ISBN 978-80-210-5837-8 (Czech ed.); ISBN 978-80-210-7644-0 (online ; pdf) (Czech ed.)

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/digilib.78798>

Access Date: 27. 06. 2024

Version: 20231114

Terms of use: Digital Library of the Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University provides access to digitized documents strictly for personal use, unless otherwise specified.

2 GERMANIC PEOPLES AT THE TURN OF PREHISTORY AND HISTORY

The identification of Germanic peoples at the outset of history leans on the following fields: Classical and Germanic philology which interpret texts written in classical and old Germanic languages. Comparative historical linguistics analyses both ethnic and place names and also early loan words. These help to map the traces of the original Germanic settlements, their early migrations and relationships. No less important are both the epigraphical analysis of the oldest original inscriptions and archaeology which mediates material culture of these peoples.

2.1 The oldest information on Germanic peoples from ancient writers

The ethnic name *Germani* is first mentioned 222 BCE in the inscription on the Roman Capitoline Hill. It deals with the victory of Claudius Marcellus who beat Gaelic Insubres and Germanic people at the battle of Clastidium in Northern Italy south of the river Po: DE GAL-LEIS INSUBRIBUS ET GERM(AN[EIS]). Nowadays, it is no longer possible to determine safely whether this is really an authentic record from the 3rd century BCE or an additional insertion from the times of Augustus. In any case, the presence of Germanic peoples south of the Alps would be rather surprising at that time. The first Germanic tribes who the ancient world might have known about were the Teutons and probably also Goths.

Around 325 BCE, a Greek, Pytheas of Massalia (= Latin Massilia, today's Marseille), undertook a voyage to the British Isles and further to the North (and probably also to the Northeast). The original description of his voyage is not preserved directly, but it must have existed judging from sceptical responses appearing a couple of centuries later. Fortunately, at least individual pieces of Pytheas's work have been preserved as citations of later authors, e.g. Eratosthenes of Cyrene (3rd century BCE) Hipparchus of Nicaea (2nd century BCE) Marcianus of Heraclea, Polybius of Megapolis, Posidonius of Apamea, Strabo and the authors writing in Latin primarily Pliny the Elder. In his book "*Naturalis Historia*", he writes [37.35-36/12/11] "...Pytheas says that the *Gutones*, a people of Germany, inhabit the shores of an æstuary of the Ocean called Metuonidis, their territory extending a distance of six thousand stadia; that, at one day's sail from this territory, is the Isle of Abalus, upon the shores of which, amber is thrown up by the waves in spring, it being an excretion of the sea in a concrete form; as, also, that the inhabitants use this amber by way of fuel, and sell it to their neighbours, the *Teutones*."¹

Pliny's insertion from the 1st century CE on the classification of the Teutons and Gutons as Germanic peoples must be anachronistic but objectively correct. The identification of Gutons with Goths does not pose any problems if we consider that in the manuscripts different forms appear. In addition to the forms *Gotonibus*, *Gut(t)onibus* another variant emerges *Guionib*[

1) ... Pytheas Gutonibus, Germaniae genti, accoli aestuarium oceani Metuonidis nomine spatium stadiorum sex milium; ab hoc diei navigatione abesse insulam Abalum; illo per ver fluctibus advehi et esse concreti maris purgamentum; incolas pro ligno ad ignem uti eo proximisque Teutonis vendere. Translated by John Bostock, & H.T. Riley (1855).

(Mette 1952, 29, note 1818), its anticipated nom. pl. **Guiones* has no parallel in any of the known Germanic ethnonyms. If we consider emendation of *G-* for *S-*, we get the form *Suiones*, which we know from Tacitus's description of Scandinavia [§44]: „And now begin the states of the Suiones, situated on the Ocean itself, and these, besides men and arms, are powerful in ships.“². From Pliny's quotation of Pytheas's report which might refer to Danish islands as well as to southern Sweden, only the reference of the *Teutoni* can be considered certain. The *Teutoni* appear again on the historic scene in the last quarter of the 2nd century BCE when they together with the *Cimbri* and most probably also with other tribes, the *Ambrones* and the *Charudes*, set out towards the Southeast across the Hercynian Forest where they were driven back by the *Boii*. Then they headed for the Danubian *Scordisci* and afterwards to the West for the *Helvetii* [Strabo 7.2.1-2].

In 113 BCE, the *Cimbri* invaded the province Noricum where they defeated the Roman army of consul Gnaeus Papirius Carbo for the first time. Then they headed for southeastern Gaul and after a couple of minor battles, they clashed with Romans for the second time in 109 BC and together with Teutons, they again achieved victory. Not even then did they gain any land in densely inhabited Gaul. Four years later in the Battle of Arausio (today's Orange), they defeated the Romans for the third time. However, they did not gain the favour of the local inhabitants and therefore they left for Hispania where they experienced a similar fate. Thus they decided to invade Italy itself. Previous military failures led the Romans to an effective reorganization of their army. Therefore in 101 BCE, Gaius Marius defeated the *Cimbri*, *Teutones* and *Ambrones* in the Battle of Aquae Sextiae (today's Aix-en-Provence).

It can be stated with certainty that the ethnonym *Germanic* was first used by Caesar in the first book of his “*Commentarii de Bello Gallico*” written in the 50's of the 1st century BCE. His interpretation of this name designated only some tribes living along the lower Rhine: “Then at least of necessity the *Germanic people*, drew their forces out of camp, and disposed of them canton by canton at equal distances: *Harudes, Marcomanni, Tribocci, Vangiones, Nemetes, Sedusii, Suevi*”³ [1.51]. At another place it is mentioned that “... Ariovistus the king of the Germans, had settled in their territories, and had seized upon a third of their land, which was the best in the whole of Gaul, and was now ordering them to depart from another third part, because a few months previously 24,000 men of the *Harudes* had come to him, for whom room and settlements must be provided.”⁴ [1.31]. Caesar ascribed Germanic origin also to *Cimbri* and *Teutoni* who had fought with the Romans already in 2nd century BC judging from his words: “the Germans should by degrees become accustomed to cross the Rhine, and that a great body of them should come into Gaul, he [Caesar] saw [would be] dangerous to the Roman people, and judged, that wild and savage men would not be likely to restrain themselves, after they had possessed themselves of all Gaul, from going forth into the province and thence marching into Italy (as the *Cimbri* and *Teutoni* particularly as the Rhone [was the sole barrier that] separated the *Sequani* from our province.”⁵ [1.33].

Pliny (24–79 CE) in his *Naturalis Historia* uses the term *Germani* in a wider sense than Caesar. He is the first one who offers a classification of Germanic tribes [4.99-100]: “There are five German races; the *Vandili*, parts of whom are the *Burgundiones*, the *Varini*, the *Carini*, and the *Gutones*: the *Ingævones*, forming a second race, a portion of whom are the *Cimbri*, the *Teutoni*, and the tribes of the *Chauci*. The *Istævones*, who join up to the Rhine, and to whom the *Cimbri* belong, are the third race; while the *Hermiones*, forming a fourth, dwell in the interior, and include the *Suevi*, the *Hermunduri*, the *Chatti*, and the *Cherusci*: the fifth race is that of the *Peucini*, who are also the *Basternæ*, adjoining the *Daci* previously mentioned. The more

2) *Suionem hinc civitates ipsae in Oceano, praeter viros armaque classibus valent.*

Translated by Alfred John Church & William Jackson Brodribb (1942).

3) *Tum demum necessario Germani suas copias castris eduxerunt generatimque constituerunt paribus intervallis, Harudes, Marcomanos, Tribocos, Vangiones, Nemetes, [S]Edusios, Suebos.*

4) *Propterea quod Ariovistus, rex Germanorum, in eorum finibus consedisset tertiamque partem agri Sequani, qui esset optimus totius Galliae, occupavisset et nunc de altera parte tertia Sequanos decedere iuberet, propterea quod paucis mensibus ante Harudum milia hominum XXIII ad eum venissent, quibus locus ac sedes pararentur.*

5) *Paulatim autem Germanos consuescere Rhenum transire et in Galliam magnam eorum multitudinem venire populo Romano periculosum videbat, neque sibi homines feroces ac barbaros temperaturos existimabat quin, cum omnem Galliam occupavissent, ut ante Cimbri Teutonique fecissent, in provinciam exirent atque inde in Italiam contenderent, praesertim cum Sequanos a provincia nostra Rhodanus divideret.*

Translated by W. A. McDevitte & W. S. Bohn (1869).

famous rivers that flow into the ocean are the Guttalus, the Visculus or Vistula, the Albis, the Visurgis, the Amisius, the Rhine, and the Mosa. In the interior is the long extent of the Hercynian range, which in grandeur is inferior to none.”⁶. Before the end of the 1st century CE, Tacitus in his *Germania* noted [§2]: “In their ancient songs, their only way of remembering or recording the past, they celebrate an earth-born god, Tuisto, and his son Mannus, as the origin of their race, as their founders. To Mannus they assign three sons, from whose names, they say, the coast tribes are called *Ingaevones*; those of the interior, *Herminones*; all the rest, *Istaevoles*. Some, with the freedom of conjecture permitted by antiquity, assert that the god had several descendants, and the nation several appellations, as *Marsi*, *Gambrivii*, *Suevi*, *Vandilii*, and that these are genuine old names. The name Germany, on the other hand, they say, is modern and newly introduced, from the fact that the tribes which first crossed the Rhine and drove out the Gauls, and are now called Tungrians, were then called Germans.”⁷.

If we compare Caesar’s, Pliny’s and Tacitus’s information, it can be concluded that Tacitus confirms Caesar’s narrower sense of the ethnonym *Germani*. On the other hand, Tacitus remarkably corresponds with Pliny in the designation of the proto-tribes: *Ingvaeoni* (Pliny) : *Ingaevoni* (Tacitus) “inhabitants of the closest seas”; *Hermioni* “inland” (Pliny) : *Herminoni* (Tacitus); *Istvaeoni* “the closest to Rhine” (Pliny) : *Istaevoles* (Tacitus). The function of the ethnonym *Germani* limited to the tribes living around the river Rhine is also confirmed by the Byzantine historian Procopius of Caesarea in his description of the “Gothic War” (Latin *De Bello Gothico*) up to the first half of 6th century CE [4/8.20]: “The *Varni* dwell beyond the Ister River, and extend as far as the northern ocean along the river Rhine, which separates them from the Franks and the other nations who dwell in that region. Now among all these nations which in ancient times dwelt on both sides of the Rhine river each people had its own particular name, but the whole group was called in common Germans.”⁸.

2.1.1 The origin of the ethnonym *Germani*

Among the many often implausible attempts to explain the ethnonym *Germanic*, the oldest etymology seems to be the most convincing. Strabo in his *Geographica* finished at the beginning of the 1st century CE wrote [7.1.2]: “Next after the Keltic nations come the Germans who inhabit the country to the east beyond the Rhine; and these differ but little from the Keltic race, except in their being more fierce, of a larger stature, and more ruddy in countenance; but in every other respect, their figure, their customs and manners of life, are such as we have related of the Kelts. The Romans therefore, I think, have very appositely applied to them the name *Germani*, as signifying genuine; for in the Latin language *Germani* signifies genuine.”⁹ It is obvious that Strabo considered plural of the Latin word *germānus* “of brothers and sisters, full, own”, metaphorically also “real, true” which he translated into Greek as γνήσιος “native;

6) *Germanorum genera quinque: Vandili, quorum pars Burgodiones, Varinnae, Charini, Gutones. alterum genus Ingvaeones, quorum pars Cimbri, Teutoni ac Chaucorum gentes. proximi autem Rheno Istvaeones, quorum mediterranei Hermiones, quorum Suebi, Hermunduri, Chatti, Cherusci. quinta pars Peucini, Basternae, supra dictis contermini Dacis. amnes clari in oceanum defluunt Guthalus, Visculus sive Vistla, Albis, Visurgis, Amisis, Rhenus, Mosa. introrsus vero nullo inferius nobilitate Hercynium iugum praetenditur.* Translated by John Bostock & H.T. Riley (1855).

7) *Celebrant carminibus antiquis, quod unum apud illos memoriae et annalium genus est, Tuistonem deum terraeditum. ei filium Mannum originem gentis conditoresque Manno tres filios adsignant, e quorum nominibus proximi Oceano Ingaevones, medii Herminones, ceteri Istaevoles vocentur. quidam, ut in licentia vetustatis, plures deo ortos pluresque gentis appellationes, Marsos Gambrivios Suebos Vandilios adfirmant, eaque vera et antiqua nomina. ceterum Germaniae vocabulum recens et nuper additum, quoniam qui primi Rhenum transgressi Gallos expulerint ac nunc Tungri, tunc Germani vocati sint: ita nationis nomen, nongentis, evaluisse paulatim, ut omnes primum a victore obmetum, mox et a se ipsis invento nomine Germani vocarentur.* Translated by Alfred John Church & William Jackson Brodrigg (1942).

8) Οἰθαροὶ μὲν ὑπὲρ Ἴστρον ποταμῶν ἴδρυνται, διήκουσι δὲ ἄχρι ἐς Ὠκεανὸν τὸν ἀρκτῶρον καὶ ποταμῶν Ῥήνον, ὅσπερ αὐτοὺς τε διορίζει καὶ Φράγγουσαι τὰ ἄλλα ἔθνη ἃ ταύτη ἴδρυνται. οὗτοι ἅπαντες, ὅσοι τὸ παλαιὸν ἀμφὶ Ῥήνον ἐκατέρωθεν ποταμῶν ᾤκηοντο, ἰδίῳ μὲν τινος ὀνόματος ἕκαστοι μετελάχανον, ἐπὶ κοινῆς δὲ Γερμανοὶ ἐκαλοῦντο ἅπαντες.

Translated by H.B. Dewing (1928).

9) εὐθὺς τοίνυν τὰ πέραν τοῦ Ῥήνου μετὰ τοὺς Κελτοὺς πρὸς τὴν ἕω κεκλιμένα Γερμανοὶ νέμονται, μικρὸν ἐξαλλάττοντες τοῦ Κελτικοῦ φύλου τῷ τε πλεονασμῷ τῆς ἀγριότητος καὶ τοῦ μεγέθους καὶ τῆς ξανθότητος, τὰλλα δὲ παραπλήσιοι καὶ μορφαῖς καὶ ἥθεσι καὶ βίους ὄντες, οἷους εἰρήκαμεν τοὺς Κελτοὺς. διὸ δὴ καὶ μοι δοκοῦσι Ῥωμαῖοι τοῦτο αὐτοῖς θέσθαι τοῦνομα ὡς ἂν γνησίους Γαλάτας φράζειν βουλόμενοι: γνήσιοι γὰρ οἱ Γερμανοὶ κατὰ τὴν Ῥωμαίων διάλεκτον.

Translated by H.C. Hamilton & W. Falconer (1924).

of the genuine, proper descent”, metaphorically also “real, true”. Strabo’s explanation based on the ‘real Celts’ is evidently naive and indefensible. Strabo’s interpretation becomes clearer if we consider Tacitus who wrote in his *Germania* at the end of the 1st century CE: [§2] “The Germans, I am apt to believe, derive their original from no other people; and are nowise mixed with different nations arriving amongst them...”¹⁰; [§4] “For myself, I concur in opinion with such as suppose the people of Germany never to have mingled by inter-marriages with other nations, but to have remained a people pure, and independent, and resembling none but themselves. Hence amongst such a mighty multitude of men, the same make and form is found in all...”¹¹. In other words, at that time Germanic people seemed to a Roman observer as similar as if they were of the same descent and therefore the Latin *germāni*.

2.1.2 The testimony of toponyms, especially hydronyms

A detailed analysis of the originally Germanic hydronyms, their morphological structure and external parallels with Baltic, Slavic and other hydronyms led J. Udolph (1994, 925–32), a specialist on European hydronymy, to demarcate the most archaic area of Germanic hydronyms within the following borders: North – the river Aller (the right tributary of Vézère); East – Middle Elbe; South – Ore Mountains and Thuringian Forest; West – Westphalia, Lower Rhine. According to Udolph right in this area, the Germanic dialect was formed from the late Indo-European continuum which manifests itself as the s.c. ‘Old European’ hydronymy. Therefore this area can be identified with the original Germanic homeland.

2.1.3 Archaic Germanic loanwords in non-Germanic languages

Remarkably rich information on the form of one of the Germanic dialects which did not change much from the original Proto-Germanic language is provided by Finnish and other Balto-Finnic languages in which hundreds of early Germanic loanwords are found. To give some examples taken from *LGL*:

Finnish, Karelian *akana*, Livonian *agān*, Votic, Estonian *aganas*, (*h*)*agan* “chaff” ~ Germanic **axanō* > Gothic *ahana* id. or **aganō* > Old Icelandic *ogn*, Old Swedish *aghn* id.;

Finnish *ansas* “bearing timber” ~ Germanic **ansaz* > Old Icelandic *áss* “timber, beam”, Old Swedish *ās* “timber, beam (for a bridge)” or **anzaz* > Gothic dat. sg. *anza* “timber, beam”;

Finnish *kulta* “gold” ~ Germanic **gulþa-* id. > Gothic *gulþ*, Old Icelandic *gull*, Old Swedish *gul*, *gull-*, *guld* id.;

Finnish, Estonian *kuningas*, Karelian *kuninkas*, Votic *kuningaz* “king” ~ Germanic **kuningaz* > Old Swedish *koning(h)*, Old High German *chunink*, *kuning*;

Finnish *lammas*, gen. *lampaan*, Karelian, Estonian *lammas*, Veps *?ambaz*, Livonian *lāmbaz* “sheep” ~ Germanic **lambaz*, *-iz* > Gothic, Old Gutnian *lamb* “sheep”, Old Icelandic, Old Swedish *lamb* “lamb”;

Finnish *miekka* “sword” ~ Germanic **mēk(i)ja-(z)* > Gothic *meki*, Old Runic accusative *makija*, Old Icelandic *mækir* id.;

Finnish *pelto*, Karelian *peldo*, Votic *pōlto*, Estonian *põld* “field” ~ Germanic **felþu-* > Old High German, Old Saxon, Old English *feld* id.;

Finnish *rengas*, Votic *rengas*, Estonian *rõnnas* “circle” ~ Germanic **xrengaz* > Old Icelandic *hringr*, Old High German, Old Saxon *hring* id.;

Finnish, Estonian, Votic *rikas*, Livonian *rikās* “rich” ~ Germanic **rikjaz* > Gothic *reiks* “ruler”, Old Icelandic *ríkr* “powerful, mighty”

10) *Ipsos Germanos indigenas crediderim minimeque aliarum gentium adventibus et hospitibus mixtos ...*

11) *Ipse eorum opinionibus accedo, qui Germaniae populos nullis aliis aliarum nationum conubiis infectos propriam et sinceram et tantum sui similem gentem existisse arbitrantur. Unde habitus quoque corporum, tamquam in tanto hominum numero ...*

Translated by Alfred John Church & William Jackson Brodrick (1942).

Finnish *ruhtinas* “leader, tribal chief” ~ Germanic *ǣruxtiñas* > Old Icelandic *dróttin*, Old High German *truhtīn*, *druhtīn* id.

From the point of view of Germanic dialectology, it is certain that the concerned source language was neither West Germanic nor their common Northwest Germanic protolanguage. V. Thomsen, the author of a classical work on early Germanic loanwords in Balto-Finnic languages and in Saami languages (1870), thought that the source language was Gothic. Although there is no direct historic evidence on Goths neighbouring with Balto-Finnic peoples, indirect indications of partially legendary origin (e.g. according to so-called *Guta Saga*, a part of the population left the island Gotland because of overpopulation and moved to Estonia) makes Goths or their ancestors to the most probable candidates. The high number of borrowings indicates that an integration of a certain population using one of the early (East?) Germanic dialects might have occurred. The semantic nature of the borrowings testifies that this population soon won the position of military, economic and social elite.

2.2 The oldest epigraphical relic

The first written record of a Germanic language is neither Gothic, which became a literary language in the first half of the 4th century, nor the early runic language whose first known written record dates to the 1st century CE. The oldest is the s.c. inscription B on the Negau helmet (the inscription A on another helmet found at the same time actually consists of 4 short texts: three Celtic and one Rhaetian). 26 helmets of Etruscan shape were discovered in 1811 at the village Ženjāk near Negau, Duchy of Styria. Today, this place is located in north-eastern Slovenia 13 km from the Austrian border. The helmets were made in 5th century BC and all the helmets were buried before 55–50 BCE. This date also presents the latest time when these inscription might have originated. No sooner than in 1924 was the Norwegian German and Celtic scholar C. Marstrand able to read the text written from right to left in northern Etruscan alphabet (closely related to Venetic alphabet)

NI//RFIETITSAKIPAE
awiet itsagīrah

he deciphered the inscription as HARIGASTI TEIWA and pointed to its Germanic nature. There are some recent interpretation for comparison (for a detailed survey see Nedoma 1995):

- Bonfante (1987[88], 35) develops Pisani’s idea (1959) that it is a gift formula “for Harigasti Teiwa”.
- Bammesberger (1990, 125, 223) sees in the inscription a personal name with an attribute in vocative “divine Harigasti”.
- Nedoma (1995, 74) supposes that it represents the name of the owner in nominative sg., i.e. *Harigasti[s] Teiwæ*. However, he was not able to explain the loss of the expected final -s.
- Kretschmer (1929) and other authors ascribe this feature to West Germanic nature of the language of the inscription.
- Seebold (1999, 260, 269–70) advocates the interpretation which was presented by R. Egger (1959): HARIGASTI TEI V A III IL “Harigasti, [the son of] Tei”. The author considered the form *Harigasti* to be a genitive with a Latin suffix. The other word then might be a patronym, a title or a nickname in nominative sg. **Te(i)us*. Seebold interprets the rest of the inscription in the same way as Egger, i.e. as numbers and abbreviations of Latin words: VEXILLATIO/-ARIUS ALARUM III ILLYRICUM.
- Markey (2001, 121–22) sees in the inscription a Rhaetian transcription of Germanic **xarjagastiz teiwaz* without endings which is characteristic for Rhaetian and Etruscan transcriptions of foreign names.

2.3 The testimony of archaeology

Although the identification of any preliterary archaeological culture with a concrete language poses problems, Germanic ethnogenesis and glottogenesis is traditionally connected with the archaeological Jastorf culture which spread since the 7th and 6th century BCE on the lower Elbe in Lower Saxony and Schleswig-Holstein. Around the half of the 1st millennium BC, this culture of the first people capable of processing iron in the North of Germany spread through Mecklenburg-Vorpommern to Lower Silesia in the East, to Thuringia and Harz Mountains in the South, up to lower Rhine in the West and to Jutland and Southern Sweden in the North (Mallory, *EIEC* 321–22).

Another early iron culture called Harpstedt-Nienburg is also considered to be Germanic; it was located along the river Aller and along the middle Weser. The origin of this Southwestern neighbour of the Jastorfs culture is dated to the half of the 8th century BCE (Kilian 1988, 81; cf. map 28). The Harpstedt-Nienburg culture can be considered to be the older evolutionary stage of the Germanic dialect continuum which later spread in the Jastorf culture for the following reasons: it was older and more influenced by Hallstatt culture which might have been predominantly formed by Celtic speaking people and the substantially higher correlation with the most archaic Germanic hydronymy as it was defined by Udolph (1994, 925–32; see §1.2.2.).