Introduction

1. CAN THE EMPIRE LAST?

"Flourishing cities, an orderly administration, an economy with highly di-
vided labor, lively traffic in the entire region between the North Sea and the
Red Sea: never before had the ancient world seen anything of the kind.
Cities stood in the countryside unfortified; barely 1 percent of the empire's
population was under arms. The army was stationed along the Rhine, the
Danube, and the Euphrates and protected the *Pax Romana*."[1] Such was the
Roman Empire at its height in the second century. And yet it foundered
into the profound crisis of the third century, a crisis it was able to weather
only by relinquishing what had been considered indispensable political,
institutional, and religious traditions.

In the wake of this crisis, nearly all spheres of life in the empire restored
by Diocletian and Constantine I were bureaucratized and militarized to an
unprecedented degree. Added to this was the external threat, first from
the Germanic peoples and the Persians, then from the Huns, Avars, and
Slavs, and finally from the Arabs. Large areas of the once universal empire
were lost or split off from the *res publica*, whose military might (imperium)
could no longer protect them or hold them in its orbit. Even where Roman
statehood was most strongly preserved, in the East, there arose what was in
reality a new empire: *we* call it Byzantium, though its tradition-conscious in-
habitants referred to themselves as Romaioi and their country as Romania.

Since that time, countless explanations of the causes behind these truly
world-historical events have been advanced and dismissed. Among those
causes the important role of the Germanic peoples should be neither ex-
aggerated nor underestimated. Moreover, anyone who has witnessed the
fall of world empires and superpowers, as our generation has, will also
bear in mind that the Roman Empire simply became too expensive for its

inhabitants, who were no longer willing to pay in money and blood for its military power. For centuries the worst defects of the Roman state had been the unresolved agrarian problems and the exploitation of the provinces and client states. Eventually a point was reached when the strains became unbearable. It is no surprise that it was a provincial, Saint Augustine, a native of Africa, who began to have doubts about the greatness of the empire and its pretensions to universality.

To be sure, Saint Augustine, like most Christians, had welcomed the Imperium Romanum as the order of the world and had supported armed struggle to defend it. But Augustine was fully aware of the earthly limitations of the empire, threatened on all sides by a "fraying at the edges," indeed by its utter demise. Moreover, unending warfare was the price for establishing and maintaining a great imperium, and this led Saint Augustine to ask: "Why must an empire be deprived of peace in order that it may be great? In regard to men's bodies it is surely better to be of moderate size, and to be healthy, than to reach the immense stature of a giant at the cost of unending disorders." After all, what were kingdoms but gangs of criminals, and large gangs were worse than small ones.[2]

Saint Augustine lived to see Rome captured by the Goths, and he died (in 430) as Gaiseric's Vandals were laying siege to his episcopal city of Hippo Regius. But a storm was already brewing on the horizon when we began our story with the empire at its height in the second century.

2. THE EMPIRE AND THE GERMANIC PEOPLES

Marcus Aurelius (161–180) had been the last of the "adoptive emperors," men who had risen to power through adoption by their predecessors. This system of succession characterized the second century, which is considered the climax and golden age of the Roman Empire and of classical civilization, perhaps even of world history. Succession by adoption, established by Nerva and Trajan, seemed to have realized once and for all the ancient demand of philosophers that the best man should rule.[3] And so, despite the troubled reality, it had become the theory, indeed the creed, of the Roman world to realize the empire's civilizing mission—*parcere subiectis et debellare superbos* (in the words of Virgil), "to spare the subjected and conquer in war the proud"—and to fulfill the claim to eternal rule.[4] There was simply no conceivable alternative.

Even in the crisis at the end of the fourth century, Ammianus Marcellinus, a Latin-writing Greek of Syrian descent, firmly believed that "Rome will last as long as mankind shall endure"; a conviction that Justinian, the conqueror of the Vandals and future victor over the Goths, was, not surprisingly, very much inclined to share as late as 537.[5]

Throughout its history, Rome had dealt with kings and peoples, *reges et*

gentes, subjecting them one by one to direct or indirect rule. In this way the borders of the empire had continually expanded, until they reached, in continental Europe, the Rhine and the Danube. Beyond this watery frontier the Germans had been living since the time of Rome's Gallic wars. Caesar's ethnographic excursuses and the *Germania* of Tacitus described these tribes, shaping the popular image of the Germans right down to the present day. Modern scholarship has, of course, lost the confident certainty of the nineteenth century when it comes to classifying and differentiating ethnic groups. The Germanic problem [the question of the identity of the Germanic tribes] is giving us a good deal more trouble today than it did just a few decades ago.[6]

There was a time when it was possible to say: "The name Germanic peoples refers to those ethnic tribes who spoke a Germanic language."[7] It was also confidently believed that "strictly delineated, sharply distinct, and coherent archaeological cultural regions unquestionably coincided with territories of specific peoples and tribes."[8] Modern archaeology has long since refuted such claims. Rudolf Much, author of a commentary on the *Germania,* already realized that even Tacitus "did not always accord language decisive importance in determining ethnic identity."[9] Even more so than Tacitus, ethnographers who described nomads had to drop language altogether as a criteria of ethnic classification, since they could do little more than note that these peoples were confusingly polyglot. And so scholars limited themselves to questions concerning "customs, the wild way of life, and weapons" (in the words of Ammianus); these, and only these, things could be discovered and had to suffice as yardsticks of ethnographic classification.[10]

Tacitus composed his *Germania* toward the end of the first century A.D. He opened his work with a description of the land of Germania, whose boundaries the ancient ethnographers drew at the Rhine and the Vistula, at the seas in the north, and at the Danube in the south. Tradition dictated that this first chapter be followed by the story of the ethnographic subject's origins. Tacitus divided this story into three parts: first he speaks of the autochthonous character of the Germans. They were pure indigenous inhabitants, their primeval god Tuisto had been born of the earth. This notion of being indigenous to the land, of never having immigrated, of getting along without any outsiders and foreign things, says much about the sense of self-esteem of the Germans who were the author's source of information. To a Latin speaker this information made perfectly good sense; after all, in his language *germanus* meant also something like "having the same parents, brotherly, genuine, real." For despite, or perhaps because of, the reality of a tribal genesis, a process that always embraced a great diversity of ethnic groups, purity of blood and native roots were highly prestigious qualities in the literary world and the real world. The latter is attested, for example, by the complementary names of the Sciri and the Bastarni.

Whereas the Bastarni were a mixed Celtic-Germanic people and were regarded as bastards (Bastarni) by their neighbors, the latter described themselves as the Sciri, "the pure ones."[11] Tacitus's own explanation for the autochthonous character of the Germans is typical for a representative of a high culture and not very flattering to Germania: the Germani were indigenous by necessity since nobody would voluntarily move to their dismal land.

The second part of Tacitus's second chapter contains the actual legend of the origins of the Germani: in their traditional songs they celebrated the earthborn god Tuisto, the "hermaphrodite," whose son Mannus was considered the "origin and founder of the [Germanic] people." Mannus (which means human being or man) had three sons, from whom were descended the tribes of the Ingaevones, Herminones, and Istaevones. However, outside of this ritualized genealogy there existed other "genuine and ancient tribal names" that also boasted divine origin, among them that of the Suebi and the Vandili (Vandals).[12]

Tacitus closes the second chapter with the interesting comment that the Germanic name was a relatively recent additional name that had developed from the specific name for a single tribe. He relates that the Tungri were the first to cross the Rhine on their push westward and were subsequently called Germani by the Gauls. The victories of the Tungri imparted such prestige to this name that it was also adopted by other tribes as a generic name.[13]

Debates concerning the Germanic identity of the Germanic tribes who lived east of the Rhine fill entire libraries, and a good deal of nonscholarly interests have kept the controversy alive.[14] In actual fact, however, the few sentences in Tacitus offer a quite credible and convincing account of what happened. Successful conquerors, whether they already spoke Germanic or not, crossed the Rhine and were called Germani by the Gauls. The name was used first by outsiders, and it remained so even after the Romans had taken it over from the Gauls. However, and here I correct Tacitus, it did not establish itself as the name of all Germanic tribes, just as French Allemands did not become the self-chosen name of the Germans. It was only on Roman territory that a German would call himself or his kind *Germanus,* as the Romans did, that is, only a German on Roman soil who was imitating Roman usage could use the word *Germanus* to refer to himself or his people.

The often-invoked sense of Germanic unity was correspondingly weak. Even the native informants from whom Tacitus learned directly or indirectly about Mannus and his three sons had differing opinions about the universal validity of the threefold ethnogeny, that is, about the meaning of the genealogy that began with the "origin and founder of the people." The descent groups as determined by the number of Mannus's sons simply did not suffice to comprise all of the "genuine and old tribal names," since

there were at least five. To be sure, among these units, which the Romans, significantly enough, called "races" or "lineages" (*genera*), there did exist ties that went beyond individual peoples and tribes and could, in fact, even unite several of the recorded descent groups. But it is hardly the case that the traditions of all Germanic peoples—including the heroic saga—were encompassed by the same phenomena, with the possible exception of the fact that in all Germanic languages the southern peoples were called Welsh-Walchs and the eastern neighbors were the Wends-Winds. These outsider names, most likely derived from the Germanic names for the Celtic Volcae and the Veneti (who were probably related to the Illyrians), presuppose a general us-consciousness toward the neighbors and had already undergone the Germanic vowel shift. Regardless of the period to which linguists date the vowel shift, an important linguistic development that differentiated Germans from Celts, by Caesar's time it was already history.[15]

In the eyes of the Romans, a German either lived in Germania or hailed from there. The classical territorial name Germania comprised the tribes that lived within its four watery borders. While the Romans were naturally most interested in their immediate neighbors along the Rhine and the Danube, knowledge about the entire Germanic realm and even beyond grew. For example, there was a rise in ethnographic information about a legendary island called Sca(n)dia-Scandinavia that supposedly lay several days by boat off the continent. In addition, the Gothic migrations expanded the territory ruled or settled by the Germanic peoples beyond the Vistula as far as Sarmatia-Scythia and its eastern boundary along the Don.

As a result, already in late antiquity the Germanic name was limited first to the Alamanni and then to the Franks as the dominant tribal groups in traditional Germania. While the Gutones, the Pomeranian precursors of the Goths, and the Vandili, the Silesian ancestors of the Vandals, were still considered part of Tacitean Germania, the later Goths, Vandals, and other East Germanic tribes were differentiated from the Germans and were referred to as Scythians, Goths, or some other special names. The sole exception are the Burgundians, who were considered German because they came to Gaul via Germania. In keeping with this classification, post-Tacitean Scandinavians were also no longer counted among the Germans, even though they were regarded as close relatives.[16]

It was thus the Romans who borrowed the Germanic name from the conquered Gauls and generalized it to the point of making the peoples east of the Rhine and north of the Danube into the Germans. Prior to that, Greek ethnography, the teacher of the Roman writers, had differentiated among the northern barbarians only the Scythians from the Celts, or at most had mentioned the Celto-Scyths in between the two. Only the Roman Caesar saw from personal experience that a third group of peoples existed as a separate ethnic identity between the Celts and the Sarmatian-Scythian

steppe peoples. Though Caesar did not discover the Germans, he added so-
lidity to the vague notions the Romans had had about them, thus helping a
Germanic ethnography to come into its own. For example, one thing Caesar
knew about his great enemy, the Suebian military king Ariovistus, was that
Celtic was not his native language.[17]

In 53 B.C., two years after Roman legions had first crossed the Rhine,
Caesar advanced into Germania for the second time. To the account of his
victorious campaign he added an ethnographic excursus on the Gauls and
the Germans. He placed particular emphasis on what he believed were
significant "differences between these two nations." Above all, Caesar was
convinced that the Germans were far more barbaric and hostile to civiliza-
tion than the Gauls. Caesar combined a special political interest with these
observations.[18] But he was also simply trying his hand at ethnography, de-
scribing primitive peoples from the perspective of a member of an advanced
civilization. Such an account contains standard phrases, preconceived no-
tions, and traditional classifications, but its purpose was, not least, to hold up
a critical mirror to the author's own civilization.[19]

Barbarians, as the conventional view had it, were slaves by nature; and
since they lacked the second—the human—nature, they were closer to ani-
mals than human beings. They did not have a history but were simply part
of the flow of natural history. This attitude has had a long and tenacious
life: in the nineteenth century the newly established Department of Prehis-
tory in Vienna was affiliated not with the Museum of Art History, but with
the Museum of Natural History, as it still is today.

Barbarians were seen as irrational, "two-legged animals." If a storm ap-
proached during a battle, they were terror struck by the fear the heavens
might collapse upon them; and relinquishing any advantage on the bat-
tlefield, they would flee in a panic. At the same time, though, they were
driven by a terrible death wish and seemed to delight in death. Even their
women took up arms and fought alongside their men. Needless to say, bar-
barians were possessed by evil spirits that drove them to commit the most
horrible acts.

Barbarians were considered incapable of living according to written
laws. Their customs were alien, unpredictable, and dangerous in the worst
of them, little more than splendid vices in the best. They had an immense
appetite for gold and an unquenchable thirst. They embraced one an-
other for the kiss of brotherhood [a customary greeting] but knew no loy-
alty to the outsider: for just as the civilized world denied that the barbarians
were fully human, they in turn regarded only their own community as the
"world of human beings," as the oldest tribal names, in particular, attest. For
that reason anybody who left the tribe was beyond the pale.

To Roman or Greek ears, the barbarian language did not sound like the
speech of humans, but more like stammering and noise. Barbarian songs

were atrocious, and under their assault the classical meter of the learned poet went to pieces. Indeed, Sidonius Apollinaris lamented, how could a poet artfully construct a six-foot verse (hexameter) while a seven-foot-tall Burgundian was yelling and stomping as he danced right outside his house?

But classical observers did generally consider barbarians, Germanic and otherwise, to be good-looking. They were blond and tall, though terribly dirty with abysmal habits of personal hygiene. They greased their hair with butter, preferably rancid butter. Their furs, which they did not take off even in the sunny south, were equally aromatic. Only the Huns were ugly; that was no surprise, as they were considered the sons of evil spirits and Gothic witches expelled from their tribe. The procreative energy of the barbarians was inexhaustible, with the cold climate of their northern homeland and its long winter nights favoring their impetuous urge to reproduce in huge numbers. Just as the next winter was certain to come, the barbarians, too, would return with the regularity of a season. If one of these swarms of locusts was repulsed or even destroyed, the next one presently arose from the swamps and forests of Germania.

So much for the conventional notions. In real life, these tribes were surprisingly small: fifteen to twenty thousand warriors—which means a total of about one hundred thousand people in a tribe—was the maximum number a large people could raise. In defiance of the facts, we hear to this day of barbarian hordes. These people are likewise presented as conquerors of the Roman Empire, even though they constituted a vanishing minority within it. Moreover, since ancient times the various migrations have often been explained on the assumption that a given territory could no longer feed its inhabitants, either because of natural catastrophes or overpopulation, whereupon the entire population or a part of it was forced to leave the land.

To be sure, the notion of a "sacred spring," the *ver sacrum*,[20] when a tribe sent out its young men in search of land, is not mere fiction. Since the barbarian economy was poor and inefficient and was in no way capable of making adequate use of the existing settlement territory, new land had to be continually acquired. A good harvest was reason to hope that one could get through the winter without hunger and disease. Surplus, however, was either nonexistent or useless, since reserves could not be laid in. Barbarian lands had nothing that compared with the giant granaries (*horrea*) of the Roman city territories and imperial domains. And so all barbarians ate the same monotonous diet. If a man outranked others in nobility, if he had a larger share of the products of the primitive tribal economy, in the form of booty or tribute from his underlings, he could purchase gold and hang it around his own neck or that of his wife or horse. Barbarian gold was already proverbial among the Greeks, who did not need treasures to buy bread

from the baker. In the old Mycenaean citadels, however, there had been plenty of gold, which still delighted the Macedonian semibarbarians at a time when they became a threat to Greece.[21]

Hunger and want were constant threats to the existence of an individual and of entire tribes. But privation was not the result of an unchecked increase in population or the devastation of the land by natural catastrophes, an assumption that was, to be sure, rejected early on.[22] Rather, it sprang from the fact that barbarian society was in a constant state of war. Peace was the exception; it had to be fixed by treaty. The enemy was not only the tribe living on the other side of a broad border zone. The enemy could be much closer, as close as the neighboring village, the next clan, or the other kin group of the same tribe. It is puzzling that tribal traditions regarded these chaotic conditions as perfectly normal. The explanation must be that the driving force of tribal life was the pathos of heroism. Barbarian traditions are the tales of the "deeds of brave men"—only the warrior matters; tribe and army are one.

Even though the etymology of words like *gens, genealogia, genus,* and *natio* can imply a common biological heritage, the formation of a barbarian tribe was a political and constitutional process that involved the most diverse ethnic elements. When such a "people in arms" migrated, an extraordinary social mobility prevailed in its ranks. Any capable person who had success in the army could profit from this mobility, regardless of his ethnic and social background. Political constitution thus meant primarily the assembling of highly diverse groups under the leadership of "known" families who traced their descent from a god and legitimated their rule by their success in keeping the tribe intact.

Ancient ethnography taught that the earlier a barbarian people introduced kingship, the higher it ranked on the scale of civilization. In reality, however, by the time Caesar came to the Rhine the old form of kingship survived only at the fringes of the Celtic-Germanic world.[23] By comparison, the Germanic kingship that the Romans encountered during the later centuries of the empire, and whose establishment they actually tended to promote in the beginning, represented a new type of rule. Along with these new kings there also arose new political entities that are difficult to grasp conceptually in our language. An "entire people" never comprised all possible members of a tribe. For example, the two main Gothic peoples, the Visigoths of southern France and Spain and the Ostrogoths of Italy, were each made up of ten or more different tribal groups, some of them of non-Germanic origin. Our modern terminology is simply incapable of describing such a reality.

The alternative is to follow the sources and use the word "gens" instead of "people" or "tribe." But even this Latin word should be used more like a cypher for an unknown quantity than as part of a definition, even though

such definitions—such as the differentiation between *natio* and gens—were attempted very early on.[24] The bewilderingly diverse ways in which such ethnic units could manifest themselves force us to make observations like the following: "a gens is composed of many gentes and is led by a royal gens," or "the success of a royal gens promotes the creation on Roman soil of an early medieval gens and its kingdom." The reader is forewarned that such confusing statements, which defy any reasonable definition, are in fact the subject of this book.[25]

The philological interest in the Germans in the nineteenth century was greater even than the historical and archeological interest. For example, the division into West Germanic, East Germanic, and North Germanic peoples came from philologists. A historian who all too readily adopts their terminology with its linguistic assumptions falls into a self-created trap. By contrast, a purely geographical division of the Germanic peoples appears quite possible and sensible. For instance, one can speak of the Scandinavians and of Germanic peoples along the Elbe, Rhine, and Danube. In cases where doing so would lead to greater clarity, the artificial term "East Germanic peoples" should be replaced by the phrase "Gothic peoples," which is true to the sources.

At one time, classical ethnography had applied the name "Suevi" to many Germanic tribes. In the first century A.D. it appeared that this native name had all but replaced the foreign name "Germans." However, in the postclassical period, that is to say, after the Marcomannic Wars that were fought and lost mostly by the Suevi, the Gothic name steadily gained in importance. By the end of the fifth century a point had been reached where it was possible to use the name "Goths" to describe the most diverse peoples: the Goths in Gaul, Italy, and Spain, the Vandals in Africa, the Gepids along the Tisza and the Danube, the Rugians, Sciri, and Burgundians, even the non-Germanic Alans.

The most important criteria for an ethnic classification as "Goths" were the shared Arian faith and a language which, thanks to Ulfilas's Gothic translation of the Bible, had developed into a common tongue of the court and the religious cult. It is no surprise that the Catholic peoples of the Frankish kingdom and the Anglo-Saxons stood out as different from the Goths, as did the Scandinavians, who were won over to Catholic Christianity much later.[26] While the Goths, even though they were religious dissidents, sought a direct link to the Roman state, the Catholic Germans achieved the same goal indirectly via Roman Christianity. A remarkable recent book on this period had every reason to open with the statement: "The Germanic world was perhaps the greatest and most enduring creation of Roman political and military genius."[27] From this perspective it mattered little that most migration kingdoms were only short-lived political creations, for their experiences did not disappear with them. By laying

the groundwork for the transition from antiquity to the Middle Ages, they created the phenomenon that is called—for better or worse—the continuity of Europe. Hence there was good reason why the rulers and peoples of these kingdoms captured the imagination of posterity, which is to this day fascinated by their meteoric rise and fall.

3. THE GERMANIC PEOPLES AND THE GERMANS OF TODAY

"The triumphs of the Goths, Vandals, and Franks are our triumphs." With these words Beatus Rhenanus (1485–1547) staked out the German claim to the Germanic history of the age of migrations. This jubilant outburst of the humanist Rhenanus is actually one of the more levelheaded statements during eight hundred years of German identification with the Germanic peoples. The highly intelligent and learned Beatus Rhenanus was known for his amiability and objectivity. And yet his words are part of an attitude that, it is hoped, strikes us today as bizarre and incomprehensible. In Nazi Germany, however, it played itself out in all its terrible consequences. As Gollwitzer has noted: "There is a multifarious continuity stretching from the Spanish mythos of the Goths to the Germanicism of the German humanists and the baroque Germanic consciousness in western and central Europe, to Montesquieu and the international cultural Germanicism of the eighteenth century." The latter formed the basis of the political Germanicism of the nineteenth century and of its vulgarized imitations—ranging from the irrational to the criminal—in the twentieth.

In 1776, Thomas Jefferson (1743–1826), later the third president of the United States, suggested the following seal for his country: "The children of Israel in the wilderness, led by a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night, and on the other side Hengist and Horsa, the Saxon chiefs, from whom we claim the honor of being descended, and whose political principles and form of government we have assumed."[28] By this time this linking of election by God with the Germanic world was already a tradition of long standing; we encounter it in the Gothic history that Jordanes wrote in the sixth century.[29] It was a literary tradition that could excite intellectuals but never had broad resonance or impact. Jefferson's seal was never engraved; Johannes Jensen's dream in 1907 of a "Gothic rebirth of North America" remained just that.

The Nazis, however, were another matter. They renamed the Polish seaport of Gdynia-Gdingen in the Reichs province of Danzig–West Prussia, calling it Gotenhafen. They thought about re-Germanifying what had once been the Gothic Crimea by settling it with southern Tyroleans. Simferopol was to become Gotenburg, and Sevastopol Theoderichshafen. Here the Germanicism of the literary tradition became the impetus for administrative and bureaucratic action. Up to that time such a thing had been un-

imaginable to the European mind, and it has remained incomprehensible to this day.[30]

But Germanicism did not have to "lead to a final, Fascist phase." In the Anglo-American world the "identification of Germanness with democracy" prevailed, all manner of political dreams notwithstanding. "As a racial and ethnic concept, Germanicism had long since become obsolete when National Socialism revived it one more time" and made it the foundation of its utter disdain for humanity. The collapse of National Socialism has also meant the disappearance of Germanicism as a political or metapolitical factor, as long as "right" Green movements do not revive its memory.[31]

And yet it had all begun so "logically" and in keeping with classical tradition. The tenth century saw the creation of the German people, largely east of the Rhine, between the northern seas and the Danube in the south, that is, in an area that had been traditionally called Germania. The great church reformer Boniface distinguished Germania from Bavaria, which was located south of the Danube and had arisen on the soil of the former Roman province of Raetia. At the same time, this classically educated Anglo-Saxon was following the tradition of antiquity when he included in Germania those Slavic peoples who had settled west of the Vistula.

By contrast, it was clear to the Alamanni and the Bavarians—for example, the "southern Tyrolean" Arbeo of Freising—that their lands were also part of Germania.[32] Charlemagne's grandson "Louis the German" owes his epithet to the fact that since the high Middle Ages, *Germanicus* has been commonly understood to mean "German." But when Louis began to be called *Germanicus* not long after his death, the word still referred to the old Germania and not to Germany. It was meant to indicate that he, among the sons of Louis the Pious, had ruled the part of the Carolingian Empire that was located predominantly on the right side of the Rhine. As a result his "kingdom in eastern Francia," the east Frankish kingdom, was composed not only of Alamanni, Bavarians, Main Franks, Saxons, and Thuringians but also the most diverse Slavic tribes from the Baltics to the Adriatic, and even some descendants of the Pannonian Avars.[33]

The clear and unequivocal equating of the Germanic peoples with the Germans is a little-known result of the Investiture Controversy. It was a defensive move, used by the imperial party in the battle between the papacy and the empire as a way of compensating for its own insecurity and responding to outside attacks with counterattacks.[34] This difficult legacy remained with Germanicism to the very end. For example, as early as the middle of the twelfth century, an Alsatian historiographer invoked the Germanic tradition to fend off French claims and to emphasize the special status of the Germans: as the name of Caesar taught the Middle Ages, he was the first emperor ("Kaiser" in German), and all emperors of the Holy Roman Empire regarded themselves as his successor. According to this

view, Caesar also laid the foundation of German history and in particular the origin of the lower nobility of knights and *ministeriales.*

In the *Bellum Gallicum* everyone could read that Caesar had defeated the Gauls-French with the help of the Germani-Germans. And from here imagination carried the story further: after the victorious general had returned to Rome, he supposedly summoned the first German diet. At this assembly Caesar "handed the lower knights over to the princes, on the condition that the princes should not use them like unfree men and servants, but would take them into their service like lords and protectors. This is why the German knights—in contrast to other peoples—are called servants of the empire and *ministeriales* of the princes."[35]

Anyone who in our day and age begins a history of the Germans with the Germanic tribes may find some familiar elements in their constitutional forms and way of life, much as Friedrich Wilhelm Schelling (1775–1854) could still call Germany a "people of peoples." However, a historian today can derive from the Germanic peoples and their history neither special status nor national superiority. He cannot identify with the Germanic peoples either politically, as did the representatives of a committed Germanicism, or in literary terms. The fact that English and modern Greek still use the Germanic name for the Germans and Germany, and that the Russians also use it alongside the common Slavic name, is historically rooted in the medieval mentality and reaches back to the prescholarly study of classical tradition. Only the humanistic rediscovery of the Tacitean *Germania* restored the comprehensive meaning of the Germanic name as it was used by ancient ethnography.

If we pick up the thread of ancient ethnography today, we may include the Germanic peoples and the period of migration to which they gave their imprint in the history of the Germans, but only because the Germanic peoples and their period are as much a part of that history as they are of the history of all European and many non-European peoples. The Germanic peoples have left traces in large areas of Europe and around the Mediterranean, even where their languages have long since ceased to be spoken.

To put it in another way, the present-day Germans have as much a Germanic history as do the Scandinavians, British, Irish, French, Italians, Spaniards, Portuguese, Hungarians, Romanians, Slavic nations, Greeks, Turks, and even the Tunisians and Maltese. To this day Germans draw inspiration from the history of the Germanic peoples, or they are linked with that history by non-Germans. However, historical reality is never merely a matter of dates and facts, but always includes the motivation of the observers. For these reasons, too, the history of the Germanic peoples stands at the beginning of a history of the Germans. But by naively equating Germanic peoples with the Germans, no matter whether it is done positively as a form of self-

identification or negatively as a form of disparagement, one loses not only the subject of the "Germanic peoples" and their history but also history *as such,* and eventually oneself. The goal of the present book is to prevent this from happening. It seeks to trace the beginnings of a history of the Germans, even though at the time our story begins there were no Germans—in the sense of *Deutsche*—and wouldn't be for a long time to come.

Postscript to the paperback edition:

This book was written in the late 1980s and first published in 1990. As his scholarly work has continued, the author has changed his views on some important topics. This especially holds true for chapter one—"Kings, Heroes and Tribal Origins" (p. 14)—and for the section of chapter four called "Recognition and Integration" (p. 112). For updated information, please refer to the author's book entitled *Gotische Studien. Volk und Herrschaft im Frühen Mittelalter,* published by C. H. Beck, Munich, 2005.

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