

## Topic Page: [Germans](#)

Definition: **German** from *The Hutchinson Unabridged Encyclopedia with Atlas and Weather Guide*

The native people or inhabitants of Germany, or a person of German descent, as well as their culture and language. In eastern Germany the Sorbs (or Wends) comprise a minority population who speak a Slavic language. The Austrians and Swiss Germans speak German, although they are ethnically distinct. German-speaking minorities are found in France (Alsace-Lorraine), Romania (Transylvania), the Czech Republic, Siberian Russia, Central Asia, Poland, and Italy (Tyrol).



Image from: [Germans, Early in Cassell's Peoples, Nations and Cultures](#)

### Summary Article: **Germans**

From *The Columbia Encyclopedia*

great ethnic complex of ancient Europe, a basic stock in the composition of the modern peoples of Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Iceland, Germany, Austria, Switzerland, N Italy, the Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg, N and central France, Lowland Scotland, and England. From archaeology it is clear that the Germans had little ethnic solidarity; by the 7th cent. B.C. they had begun a division into many peoples. They did not call themselves Germans; the origin of the name is uncertain. Their rise to significance (4th cent. B.C.) in the history

of Europe began roughly with the general breakup of Celtic culture in central Europe. Before their expansion, the Germans inhabited N Germany, S Sweden and Denmark, and the shores of the Baltic. From these areas they spread out in great migrations southward, southeastward, and westward.

Although the earliest mention of the Germans is by a Greek navigator who saw them in Norway and Jutland in the 4th cent. B.C., their real appearance in history began with their contact (1st cent. B.C.) with the Romans. The chief historical sources for the culture and distribution of the Germans are Tacitus' *Germania* and *Agricola* and the remnants in later ages of early Germanic institutions. Apart from describing their barbarity and warlikeness, Caesar's *Commentaries* tell little. As the centuries passed the Germans became increasingly troublesome to the Roman Empire. The Vandals in the west and the Ostrogoths in the east were the first to attack the empire seriously. The Ostrogoths were a part of the Gothic people, often called the East Germanic, whose language (Gothic) was the first written Germanic language. The Goths apparently moved SE from the Vistula River to the Balkans, thence W across Europe.

### **German Tribes**

The chief German tribes included the Alemanni, the Angles (see Anglo-Saxons), the Burgundii (see Burgundy), the Lombards, the Saxons, and the Visigoths. The many Scandinavians included the Icelanders, who produced the first Germanic literature (see Old Norse literature). Many other Germanic tribes appeared in various ancient periods. The Chamavi were in the 1st cent. N of the Rhine and SE of the Zuider Zee; by the 4th cent. they had moved southward and joined with the Frankish people. The Cimbri appeared in Transalpine Gaul late in the 2d cent. B.C. and fought Roman armies; c.103 B.C. they migrated to Italy with some Helvetii and Teutons and were crushed by Marius in 101 B.C. The Heruli, or Eruli, possibly stemming from Jutland, inhabited the shores of the Sea of Azov, E of the Don, in the 3d cent. A.D. They fought with the Goths against the Huns, joined Odoacer in his attack on the Roman emperor, and settled in N Lower Austria. In the 6th cent. their kingdom was destroyed by Lombards,

and they disappeared as a group.

The Gepidae, a Gothic people, moved southward from the Baltic at Vistula into the Hungarian plain W of the Danube. Overwhelmed by Attila, they survived only to be defeated in 489 by Theodoric the Great and in 566 by the Lombards and Avars. They disappeared soon after. The Marcomanni, probably originally part of the Suebi, lived N of the Danube in Germany in the 1st and 2d cent. A threat to the Roman border, they were defeated by Marcus Aurelius in the Marcomannic War (166–180). They moved into the country of the Celtic Boii and probably expanded into Bavaria, where they seem to be the Baiuvarii, or Boiarii, ancestors of the Bavarians.

The Suebi, or Suevi, mentioned by Tacitus as a central German people, gave their name to Swabia. They probably included a number of smaller tribes, of whom the Alemanni and the Marcomanni were two. Others were the Semoni, the Hermunduri, and the Quadi. The Suebi lived near the Elbe c.650 B.C.; thence they spread S into Germany. By 100 B.C. they no longer constituted a political unit, although Tacitus maintained that they retained cultural and religious unity. The Teutons, who were allied with the Cimbri in 103 B.C., were crushed (102 B.C.) by Marius at Aquae Sextiae (present-day Aix-en-Provence). By an extension of the name of that tribe the Germanic peoples are sometimes called Teutonic.

See Germanic laws; Germanic religion; Germany.

## Bibliography

See Owen, F. , *The Germanic People* (1960);  
Schalk, A. , *The Germans* (1971).

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