


The Early Germanic Community

HE warlike Germanic tribes, who overturned the western monarchy of Rome, hold a very important place in history. The most civilized nations of today claim these tribes as their ancestors and in the rude institutions of those barbarians we may still distinguish the original principles of our present laws. Almost the whole of Prussia, Finland, Sweden, Norway, Denmark and Germany, were peopled by the numerous tribes of this great nation. The Rhine on the west and the Danube on the south separated them from the provinces of the empire.

In general these tribes are described as being large and very strong, better adapted to violent exertions than to patient labour. They seem to have been wretchedly destitute, passing their lives in ignorance and poverty. Their towns were no more than rude fortifications, presumably designed to shelter the women, children and cattle, during the absence of the warriors. Tacitus tells us that these people regarded towns as "places of confinement rather than of security." Even their dwellings were isolated, one from the other and were usually constructed near a stream. These too, were huts, built roughly and thatched with straw. The men usually dressed themselves in the skin of some animal and the women manufactured for their own use a kind of linen. The game of their dense forests supplied their food and their monstrous herds of cattle constituted their wealth.

They cultivated corn to a very limited extent, but the greater part of their territory lay waste without tillage.

As far as their mineral wealth was concerned the Germans seemed almost entirely ignorant of its resources. Sweden, today supplies Europe with iron, and even the arms of the Germans show that they hardly knew the use of this metal. They made no use of coin and carried on traffic by the exchange of commodities.

All these facts go to prove that the Germanic people were in their primitive existence, in grossest barbarism. It is not surprising then that indolence and carelessness about the future marked their general character. The works that were really a necessity such as the care of the family, the management of the land and cattle were delegated to the old, the infirm, to women and slaves. The lazy warrior lived but to eat and sleep.