

# Tacitus germania and women

[Sociology](#), [Women](#)



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Germania, written by the Roman Cornelius Tacitus in 98 A. D, is a historical work on the warlike Germanic tribes located north of the Danube and the Rhine rivers. Anthropology is the study of societies, cultures, and origins of human races. In Germania, Tacitus describes the inhabitants, customs, and society of these Germanic tribes giving valuable anthropological insight. Tacitus specifically describes the role women held in these early Germanic societies.

Germania is anthropologically insightful of Germanic women by showing the high regard the Germanic tribes held toward women; evidenced through the women's influence on wars, their role in society, and the Germanic marriage customs. Cornelius Tacitus was born in 56 A. D in the area of southern Gaul. By the year 75 he lived in Rome training as an orator. A year later he married the daughter of the consul Julius Agricola. In later years he wrote a biography of Julius Agricola. He eventually took up a career in politics rising from senator all the way up to the consulship in 97.

After the consulship he continued with his political career as proconsul of Asia but began to write historical works as well. Some of Tacitus' major works include Agricola written in 97-8, Germania written in 98, The Histories, recording Roman history from 69 to 96, and The Annals, recording the history from 14 to 68. Tacitus is known as one of the greatest historians and prose stylists who wrote in Latin. His works The Histories and The Annals are among the masterpieces of Latin literature. Little evidence exists of Tacitus later life or the date of his death. 1

Germania is split into 46 chapters or sections. Each one focuses on a different aspect of Germanic life and society. The book begins with a description of the geography of Germania with its boundaries of rivers, mountains, and the ocean. Tacitus then continues to describe the people themselves as a race "little affected by immigration" (37) because of their geography. The name 'Germania' came from the first people to cross the Rhine and defeat the Gauls. The inhabitants took the name Germani in honor of the conquerors and the terror they brought with them.

Tacitus gives descriptions of the Germani's religion, warlike society, home life, government, and the specific Germanic tribes or groups. With regards to religion, the Germani have many gods. Their most important god is Mercury. The Germani were known to give human sacrifices to appease Mercury at times. Other gods such as Hercules and Mars merely required animal sacrifices. The Germani are a very warlike society. Tacitus describes in detail their national war song to the gods sung before and during battle with a deep throaty roar. In the words of Tacitus, "The Germani have no taste for peace" (41). They are a culture of war.

This warlike culture effects the home life and government of the Germani. Marriage is an important institution for the Germani and is highly revered. Tacitus cites that the women are in fact one of the men's greatest motivations for success in war. Though their kings are chosen by noble birth, they choose leaders for their valor. Neither the leaders nor the kings, however, have absolute power. Tacitus expounds upon all these aspects of Germani society in great detail. To conclude Germania Tacitus describes the

specific practices of more than 20 individual nations and tribes within the area of Germania.

The first evidence Germania gives of the Germani's high regard for women is apparent through the women's influence on the men during war. The women encouraged the men during war and had a great power to motivate the men. Tacitus explains how the women and children were the dearest possessions of the men and continues to say, "... to them he looks for his highest praise. The men take their wounds to their mothers and wives, who are not afraid of counting and examining the blows, and bring food and encouragement to those fighting" (38).

The women are taking a very active role in war through caring for the men. The men do not take this for granted, this is their greatest motivation. Tacitus explains more fully the women's ability to motivate the men, " Tradition has it that armies wavering and even on the point of collapse have been restored by the steadfast pleas of the women, who bared their breasts and described how close they were to enslavement - a fate that the men fear more keenly for their women than for themselves" (38).

The women had such a strong power to motivate the men that they could restore the strength of a failing army. The Germani's high regard of women is evident by the women's ability to motivate and encourage the men during war. The thoughts and opinions of Germani women were regarded highly giving them a valuable role in society. Tacitus explains, "... they believe that there resides in women something holy and prophetic, and so do not scorn their advice or disregard their replies" (39).

Many societies, especially during this time, believed women to be incapable of intelligent reasoning. The Germani, however, believe women have something holy or prophetic within them. This caused the men to listen to the advice and opinions of the women rather than toss them aside as ignorant. This role of women, possessing something holy and sharing advice, shows a high regard for women in Germanic society. Lastly, the respect and honor shown to women through the Germanic marriage customs show a high regard for women.

Tacitus praises the Germani's strict view of marriage. Tacitus describes their marriage customs, " They are almost unique among barbarians in being satisfied with one wife each... The dowry is brought not by wife to husband, but by husband to wife. Parents and kinsmen attend and approve the gifts, gifts not chosen to please a woman's whim or gaily deck a young bride, but oxen, a horse with reins, a shield with spear and sword" (43). By each man taking one woman for life the Germani demonstrate a value of women as more than property.

The most unique and remarkable custom though regards the dowry. In most cultures the dowry is the gifts and inheritance the bride has to offer the groom. With the Germani, however, this is reversed. Instead the man must bring a dowry to offer the bride. The dowry is not made up of frivolous items for the bride to enjoy but practical items for living. This custom shows the bride's worth and honor and demonstrates the Germani's view of women as being valuable and intelligent. The women of Germania are not pushed aside or placed at the bottom of Germanic society.

Instead, they motivate the men in war renewing their strength when they are weary. The men value the women enough to place their safety above their lives in battle. The Germani believe the women to have something holy within them, so the men listen to them and do not disregard their advice. Finally, the men do not trade women as possessions but honor them with a dowry and stay true to one woman in marriage. These anthropological insights of Germanic women described in Germania show the Germanic people held women in high regard in their culture and society.