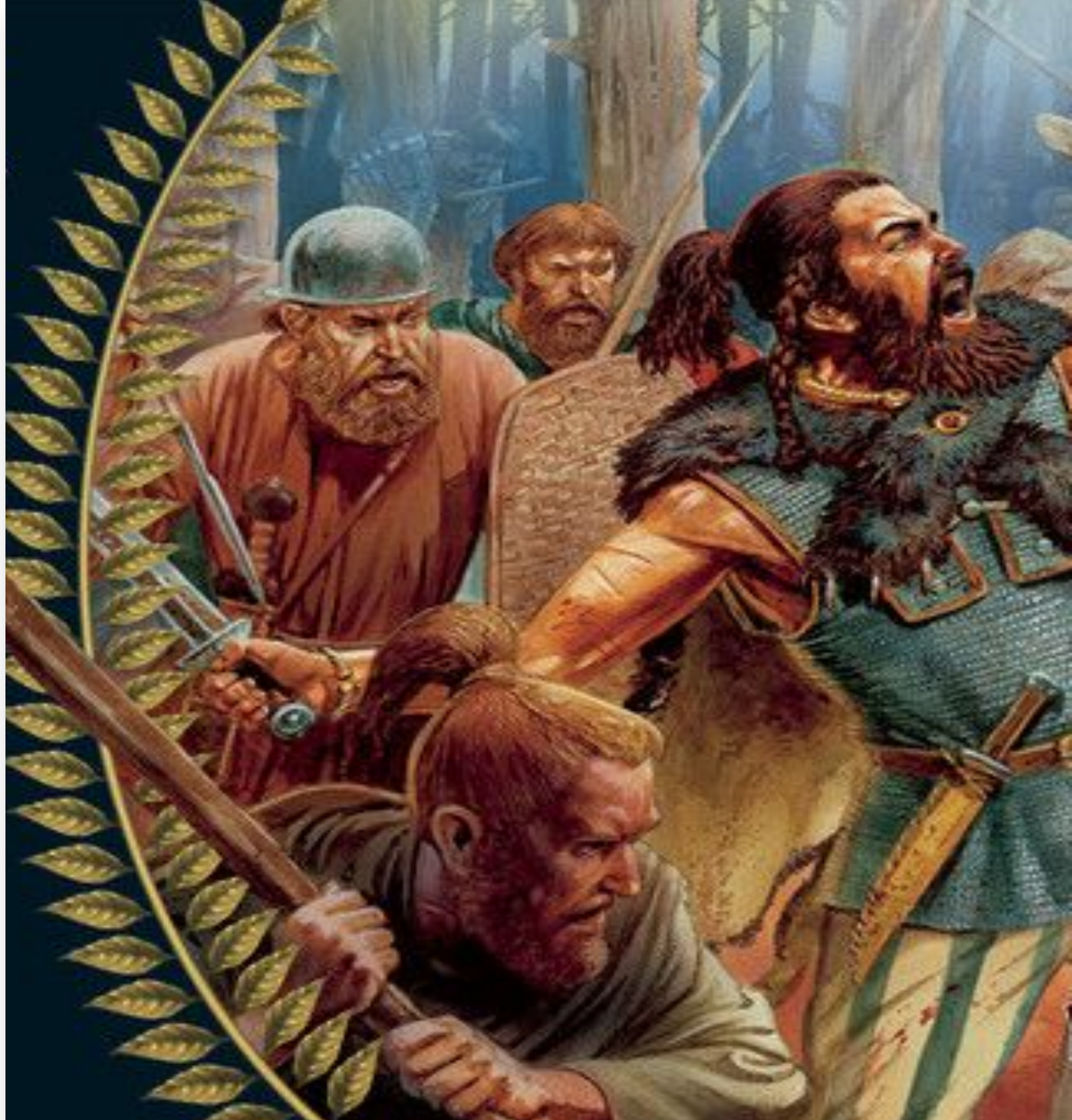


*The traditions and beliefs of the
Proto-Germanic Peoples*





Germanic settlements were typically small, rarely containing much more than ten households, often less, and were usually located at clearings in the wood. Settlements remained of a fairly constant size throughout the period. The buildings in these villages varied in form, but normally consisted of farmhouses surrounded by smaller buildings such as granaries and other storage rooms. The universal building material was timber. Cattle and humans usually lived together in the same house.



Although the Germans practiced both agriculture and husbandry, the latter was extremely important both as a source of dairy products and as a basis for wealth and social status, which was measured by the size of an individual's herd. The diet consisted mainly of the products of farming and husbandry and was supplied by hunting to a very modest extent. Barley and wheat were the most common agricultural products and were used for baking a certain flat type of bread as well as brewing beer. The fields were tilled with a light-weight wooden plow, although heavier models also existed in some areas. Common clothing styles are known from the remarkably well-preserved corpses that have been found in former marshes on several locations in Denmark, and included woolen garments and brooches for women and trousers and leather caps for men. Other important small-scale industries were weaving, the manual production of basic pottery and, more rarely, the fabrication of iron tools, especially weapons





Julius Caesar describes the Germans in his Commentarii De Bello Gallico, though it is still a matter of debate if he refers to Northern Celtic tribes or clearly identified German tribes.”[The Germans] have neither Druids to preside over sacred offices, nor do they pay great regard to sacrifices. They rank in the number of the gods those alone whom they behold, and by whose instrumentality they are obviously benefited, namely, the sun, fire, and the moon; they have not heard of the other deities even by report. Their whole life is occupied in hunting and in the pursuits of the military art; from childhood they devote themselves to fatigue and hardships. Those who have remained chaste for the longest time, receive the greatest commendation among their people; they think that by this the growth is promoted, by this the physical powers are increased and the sinews are strengthened. And to have had knowledge of a woman before the twentieth year they reckon among the most disgraceful acts; of which matter there is no concealment, because they bathe promiscuously in the rivers and [only] use skins or small cloaks of deer’s hides, a large portion of the body being in consequence naked.



They do not pay much attention to agriculture, and a large portion of their food consists in milk, cheese, and flesh; nor has any one a fixed quantity of land or his own individual limits; but the magistrates and the leading men each year apportion to the tribes and families, who have united together, as much land as, and in the place in which, they think proper, and the year after compel them to remove elsewhere. For this enactment they advance many reasons-lest seduced by long-continued custom, they may exchange their ardor in the waging of war for agriculture; lest they may be anxious to acquire extensive estates, and the more powerful drive the weaker from their possessions; lest they construct their houses with too great a desire to avoid cold and heat; lest the desire of wealth spring up, from which cause divisions and discords arise; and that they may keep the common people in a contented state of mind, when each sees his own means placed on an equality with [those of] the most powerful."



While the Germanic peoples were slowly converted to Christianity by varying means, many elements of the pre-Christian culture and indigenous beliefs remained firmly in place after the conversion process, particularly in the more rural and distant regions. The Ostrogoths, Visigoths, and Vandals were Christianized while they were still outside the bounds of the Empire; however, they converted to Arianism rather than to orthodox Catholicism, and were soon regarded as heretics. The one great written remnant of the Gothic language is a translation of portions of the Bible made by Ulfilas, the missionary who converted them. The Lombards were not converted until after their entrance into the Empire, but received Christianity from Arian Germanic groups.



The Franks were converted directly from paganism to Catholicism without an intervening time as Arians. Several centuries later, Anglo-Saxon and Frankish missionaries and warriors undertook the conversion of their Saxon neighbours. A key event was the felling of Thor's Oak near Fritzlar by Boniface, apostle of the Germans, in 723. Eventually, the conversion was forced by armed force, successfully completed by Charlemagne, in a series of campaigns (the Saxon Wars), that also brought Saxon lands into the Frankish empire. Massacres, such as the Bloody Verdict of Verden, were a direct result of this policy. In Scandinavia, Germanic paganism continued to dominate until the 11th century in the form of Norse paganism, when it was gradually replaced by Christianity.

