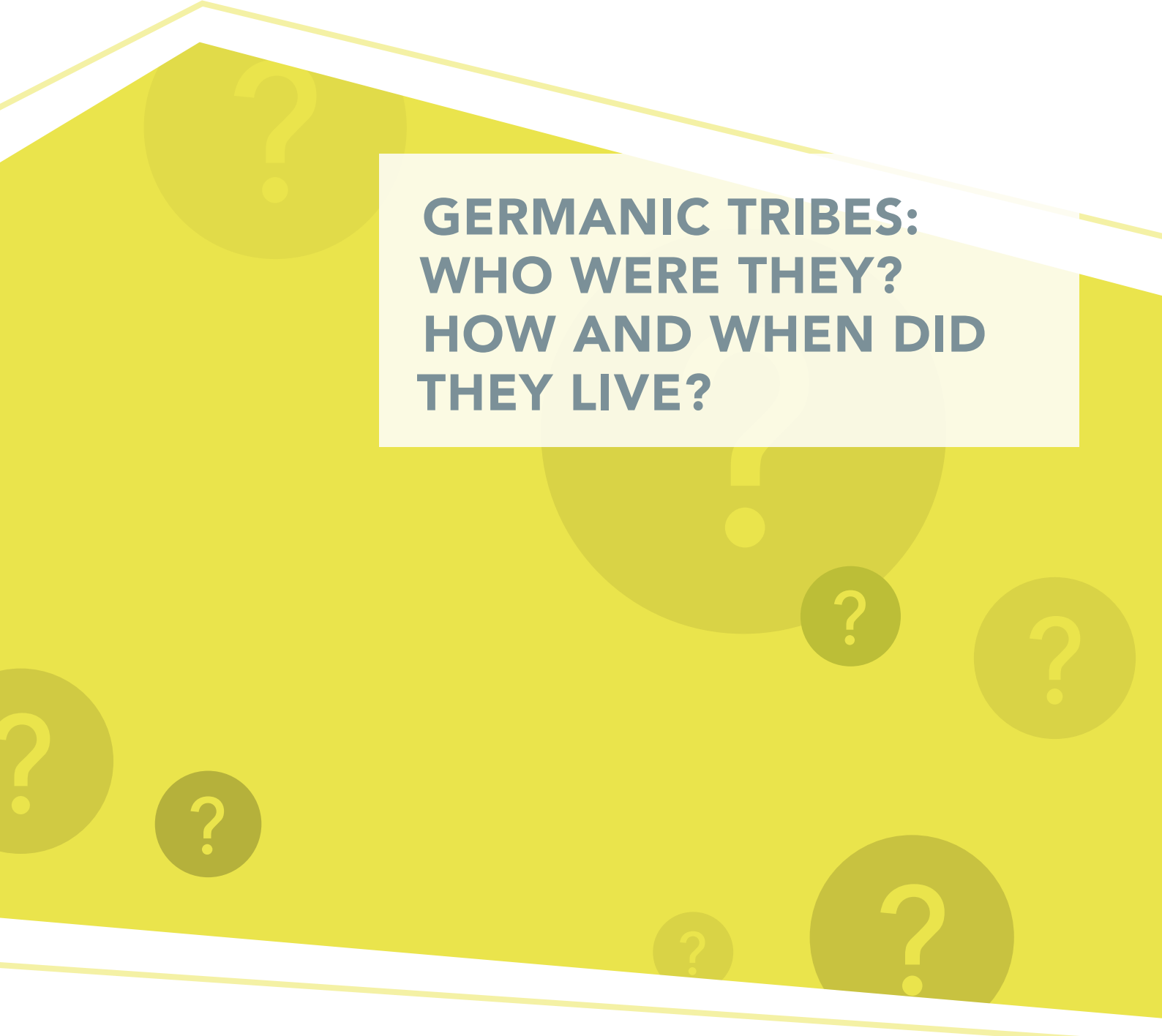


EDUCATIONAL MATERIALS FOR SCHOOLS  
"GERMANIC TRIBES. ARCHAEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES"

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**GERMANIC TRIBES:  
WHO WERE THEY?  
HOW AND WHEN DID  
THEY LIVE?**

**Exhibition**

September 2020 until March 2021 in the Museum of  
Prehistory and Early History, Berlin; May to October 2021,  
LVR-LandesMuseum Bonn.



## Activities

- 1 How do you imagine a Germanic woman or man to have looked?  
Draw your image.



- 2 Where do your ideas and images about Germanic tribes come from?

## Who and what were Germanic tribes?

There is no easy answer to this question! Although many assume Germanic tribes formed a big and uniform group, not unlike a people, that notion has been proven to be incorrect. Germanic tribes spoke languages that were similar, but individual tribes formed different local cultures. Most importantly, they did not share the same ancestry and they did not give rise to what later became known as Germans.

The notion that Germanic tribes formed a coherent group of people stems from the Romans. They called all people living east of the Rhine and north of the Danube "Germans." Whether Germanic tribes actually called themselves that, is not known, because they did not write any texts about themselves. All written sources about Germanic tribes are of Roman origin.

Archaeologists, who interpret the objects they dig up instead of written sources, know from their excavations that many different groups lived in the region defined above. When we talk about Germanic tribes today, we mean people who lived in northern, central, and eastern Europe between the first century before and the fourth century of the common era.

## When and where did they live?

Romans called the region between Rhine, Danube, Scandinavia, and the Black Sea Germania. They differentiated this region from the provinces within the Roman Empire, Upper Germania (*Germania superior*) and Lower Germania (*Germania inferior*).

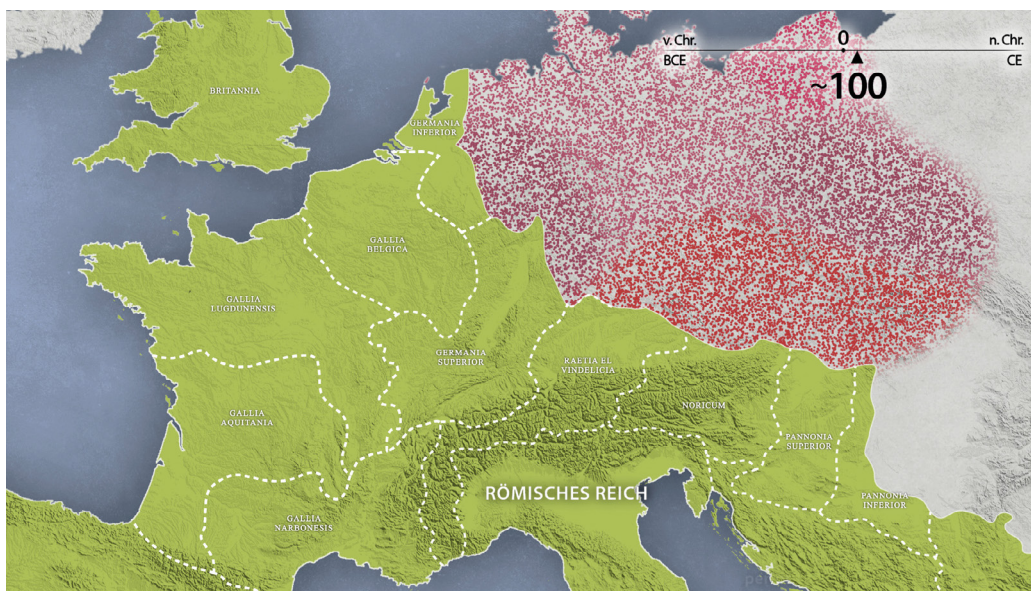


Image 1: Map of Germania around 100 CE.

Architectura Virtualis, 2020



## Activity

- 3 The map in image 1 shows the region that the Romans called *Germania*. Compare it with a current map of Europe and name the countries of that region today.

## How did Germanic tribes live?

Most Germanic peoples lived in settlements with up to 20 farmsteads. These farms consisted of longhouses, in which people and animals lived together, as well as granaries and workshops. Feddersen Wierde, a site in present-day Lower Saxony, is the settlement in which archaeologists have found the most and best-preserved remains. Houses were built of wood and clay. These materials do not mean that the houses were inferior to the stone houses that were built in the Roman Empire, they were simply adapted to a way of life and climate. It is possible that several families lived under one roof.

Germanic settlements grew and produced almost everything that their inhabitants needed to live. Archaeologists refer to Germanic tribes as cattle farmers, which means that they grew grain and vegetables and kept animals for their meat and skins. Tools, clothing, and vessels were made on site by craftsmen.



Image 2: Drawing

Mikko Kriek, 2020



## Activity

- 4 Describe a Germanic settlement in your own words. Look closely at the drawing for clues.



## Against whom did Germanic tribes fight?

Archaeologists have found many weapons in what the Romans called *Germania*. Warriors seem to have been well equipped: they had lances, spears, swords and round shields. Different groups often fought each other. Sometimes they joined forces to fend off attacks by the Roman army or to raid outposts of the Roman Empire together. These fights were well organized. Germanic tribes fought against Romans, for example, at Kalkriese, in a battle that came to be known as the *Varusschlacht*, or at a place in Lower Saxony called Harzhorn.



Image 3: Drawing "Before the Battle"

Benoît Clarys, 2020



## Activity

- 5 What could have been the reasons, triggers and goals of the struggles between Germanic tribes with one another and their struggles with Romans?

## What did Germanic tribes believe in?

It is very difficult to find out what Germanic tribes believed. We only have Roman accounts that have described the religious acts of Germanic tribes, and we can't be sure that what the Romans wrote was actually what occurred. In addition to these written sources, there are archaeological finds that may have to do with cult and religion. The two wooden figures shown here, for example, may have been used to represent gods. But they could also have been signposts in the swamps and moors. It is likely that there was no one, standardized Germanic religion, but possibly Germanic tribes offered sacrifices to their gods by sinking valuable objects into bogs and lakes.

You may have heard of the gods Odin or Thor and thought they were Germanic gods. But no one can know that for a fact today. The names of these gods appear for the first time in a text from the 13th century called the *Edda*. That work contains Scandinavian tales of gods and heroes that were long regarded as "Germanic gods." But there is no proof that the two religious cultures are connected.



Image 4: Wooden Figures

Thüringisches Landesamt für Denkmalpflege und Archäologie. Photo: H. Arnold



## Activity

- 6 Why is it so difficult to find out about the religion of Germanic tribes?

## With what did Germanic tribes trade?

The people in "Germania" and in the Roman Empire traded a great deal with each other on numerous transport routes across Central and Northern Europe. Romans bought tools made of iron and lead from Germanic tribes in the form of small bricks. Archaeologists suspect that these lead bars were made especially for Romans. Romans probably also bought skins, amber, honey, and even slaves from Germanic tribes. On the other hand, many objects have been found in Germanic areas that had been made in the Roman Empire: ornamented ceramic wares, glass, jewelry and weapons.

The silver and gold object shown here has an interesting history of transformation: originally it was a Roman drinking container and was found in the excavation of a Germanic tomb in Gommern, Saxony-Anhalt, but it had been converted into a shield boss. A shield boss is placed in the middle of a shield to protect the fighter's hand.



Image 5: Shield Boss.

Landesamt für Denkmalpflege und Archäologie Sachsen-Anhalt. Photo: Andrea Hörentrup



## Activities

- 7 Which goods did Romans sell or trade to Germanic tribes and which did Germanic tribes sell or trade to Romans?
- 8 Compare the information from these worksheets about Germanic tribes to the pages that mention Germanic tribes in your history textbook. Talk in class about differences you find.