



A Review of *Exploring the Ancient Germanic Past, From Neanderthal Man to Karl der Grosse*

GAPA Editor Mike Haas' Seminar
now at the DANK Haus, German American Cultural Center



How I took a class at DANK and discovered my barbarian past

by *Brigitte Schwarz King J.D.*

In addition to language instruction, and cooking classes, DANK/Chicago tried out a new type of class this Fall of 2014: “Early German History, from Neanderthal Mann to Karl der Grosse”, moderated by Mike



Haas. I have always been curious about cave man, and was interested in studying German history, but didn't expect the class would yield me a new role model from out of the pages of history and leave me inspired and invigorated!

As a German-American living in Chicago since the age of seven, what little I knew of German history centered on WWII, which my parents lived through, and WWI, in which my grandfather fought. In school we

learned about the Thirty Years War, which students like because we can all answer the question of how long it lasted. The history books in school were full of dates — such as, “Germany became a nation-state in 1871” — all of which managed to seem a bit boring.

But learning about history from the new perspective of beginning with cave man was mysterious and exciting and lent a new insight into my roots. We learned in this class that for much of their early history our ancestors were, quite simply, barbarians. According to the Roman historian Tacitus, they were big and strong. They wore animal furs, the men with long and scruffy beards, the women with long flowing hair, the children wearing nothing but a cape loosely around their shoulders fastened with a thorn (or a bronze pin for the well-born). The Germans were more maritally faithful than their Roman counterparts, writes Tacitus. What impressed me was the position of respect the ancient German women held. As seers and prophetesses, they determined when the men should go into battle. And if the battle lagged, the German women joined in, fighting with a sword in each hand rather than be captured and have themselves and their children subjected to slavery. Their love of freedom, their passion and physical strength bring to mind my own indomitable mother Hertha, who survived two world wars and shepherded her family across an ocean so they would be safe. I know what I will wear to the next costume party: I will be Thusnelda, who defied her father to marry the man she loved — the leader of the briefly united Germanic tribes which defeated the Romans in an epic battle over three days in September of the year nine, known by his Latin name, Arminius, or his German name, Hermann.

When we first entered the class, we saw the set-up was not the usual one. A projector pointing at a screen lent a glow to the darkened classroom on the third floor of the Dankhaus. We were treated to videos and film excerpts, and to slides showing maps or summarizing information. Books were available, but mainly to be loaned by Mr. Haas to members of the class or to be examined in class such as a volume explaining German family names. But there were no required readings, no homework, no tests and no grades. Mr. Haas, who has an MA in History and is a retired Chicago police officer,



Herman and Thusnelda

organized the material he gathered from several sources and presented it according to the method used at the police academy, he said, rather than the familiar, often boring style of the droning university professor who stands in the front and reads from notes. Especially innovative is Mr. Haas' role as moderator and not pontificator. Many of the current conclusions regarding the early origins of modern man, for example, are not set in stone but are still being modified with each new archaeological discovery. Mr. Haas knows how to step back while the class discusses mysteries such as how, though homo sapiens supplanted Neanderthal man by probably wiping them out in repeated skirmishes whenever they met, and despite the two being considered different species, it still happens that modern man carries in his genes a few percent of Neanderthal DNA.

For the prehistory period, there are scant written records, and we must rely on the bones, clothing and artifacts found in burial mounds or bodies preserved in bogs. Compounding the problem in the study of early German history is the fact that the Germans did not read nor write until the time of Charlemagne, also known as Karl der Grosse. We can read about them in brief accounts from foreign writers, as when they came into contact with the Roman Empire. But many events must be pieced together in modern times, such

as the battle led by Hermann against the Romans in the Teutoburg Forest in AD 9. We know the number of Roman soldiers involved (20,000 i.e., three legions), but have no idea of the number of Germans – they did not count themselves, nor divide themselves into fighting units of ten which fought in a coordinated manner like the Romans. How three legions of the most organized fighting force of the time were lured into roadless, dark primeval forests and bogs and were cut down by hordes of barbarians with inferior weapons is gleaned mainly through archaeological excavations undertaken in the late 20th Century. We can see the nails from the shoes the Roman soldiers stood in where they were cut down, the remains of the bridles and bones of the horses, and where the arrows landed. Our ancestors managed well enough without writing; news of the German victory reached Rome via the delivery of the defeated Roman general's severed head!

I had not realized how engaging and empowering the study of history can be. It makes a wonderful pastime for those with advanced degrees – as were many of the students in Mr. Haas' class according to DANK/Chicago official Nikki Dombrowski – and this is equally so for those who never really liked school so much. Besides books and periodicals, today's student has

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access to historical movies and even Youtube videos, making history a perfect hobby to pursue at any age.

A Youtube video tells the story of how quarrymen found a partial skull and bones bones of Neanderthal man were found on the floor of a cave in the Neander valley (valley in German = "Thal", old spelling, the h is silent) near Duesseldorf in Germany by quarrymen in 1856. They were almost discarded, but the local high school teacher was called in. Eventually it was determined that the remains dated back 40,000 years. Neanderthal man was supplanted by homo sapiens who emerged from Africa. Many generations later the people inhabiting this region would become the Germans of today, and their economy would be considered the driving force of modern Europe. After learning all this,

does it surprise anyone that Germany today is headed by a strong, intelligent woman? Not me!



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