



The earliest period of Germanic History

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The history of the Germanic group begins with the appearance of what is known as the Proto-Germanic (PG) language. It is supposed to have split from related IE tongues sometime between the 15th and 10th c B.C. The would-be Germanic tribes belonged to the western division of the IE speech community.



As the Indo-Europeans extended over a larger territory, the ancient Germans or Teutons moved further north than other tribes and settled on the southern coast of the Baltic Sea in the region of the Elbe.



This place is regarded as the most probable original home of the Teutons. It is here that they developed their first specifically Germanic linguistic features which made them a separate group in the IE family.

PG was never recorded in written form.

- It is believed that at the earliest stages of history PG was fundamentally one language, though dialectally coloured. In its later stages dialectal differences grew, so that towards the beginning of our era Germanic appears divided into dialectal groups and tribal dialects. Dialectal differentiation increased with the migrations and geographical expansion of the Teutons caused by overpopulation, poor agricultural technique and scanty natural resources in the areas of their original settlement.
- Towards the beginning of our era the common period of Germanic history came to an end. The Teutons had extended over a larger territory and the PG language broke into parts.

PG split into three branches

East Germanic (Vindili in Pliny's classification)



North Germanic
(Hilleviones)



West Germanic (which embraces
Ingveones, Istsevones and Hermi-
no-nes in Pliny's list).

East Germanic

- The East Germanic subgroup. was formed by the tribes who returned from Scandinavia at the beginning of our era. The most numerous and powerful of them were the Goths.
- The Gothic language, now dead, has been preserved in written records of the 4th–6th c The Goths were the first of the Teutons to become Christian.
- The other East Germanic languages, all of which are now dead, have left no written traces. Some of their tribal names have survived in placenames, which reveal the directions of their migrations: Bornholm and Burgundy go back to the East Germanic tribe of Burgundians; Andalusia is derived from the tribal name Vandals; Lombardy got its name from the Langobards, who made part of the population of the Ostrogothic kingdom in North Italy.

North Germanic

- The earliest written records in Old Danish, Old Norwegian and Old Swedish date from the 13th c. In the later Middle Ages Danish and then Swedish developed into national literary languages. Nowadays Swedish is spoken not only by the population of Sweden; the language has extended over Finnish territory and is the second state language in Finland.

West Germanic

- The dialectal differentiation of West Germanic was quite distinct even at the beginning of our era since Pliny and Tacitus described them under three tribal names. On the eve of their "great migrations" of the 4th and 5th c. the West Germans included several tribes. The Franconians (or Franks) subdivided into Low, Middle and High Franconians. The Angles and the Frisians (known as the Anglo-Frisian group), the Jutes and the Saxons inhabited the coastal area of the modern Netherlands, the Federal Republic of Germany and the southern part of Denmark.