



The Contribution and Function of Germanic Culture in the Construction of European Cultural Traits

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Abstract. Ancient Greece has long been regarded as the ancestor of European civilization, but the Germanic people are often despised in the formation of modern European culture. Their contribution to modern European culture is no less than that of ancient Greece. In their native land, the Germanic people developed a cultural characteristic of emphasizing the whole and advocating bravery and glory. After the fall of the Roman Empire, they invaded Europe, established their dynasty, influenced the whole European continent with their own culture, and gave European culture rebirth and recasting. Based on the history and culture of the Germanic nation, this paper combs and summarizes the main characteristics and historical significance of the Germanic people. It can be found that, like Greek and Roman cultures, Germanic cultural characteristics also have a certain degree of impact on other parts of Europe and realize cultural complementarity. This paper is only an attempt to study Germanic culture. There are still many deficiencies on literature materials and views. It is expected to attract more scholars' interest and attention to Germanic culture.

Keywords: Germanic Culture · European Cultural Traits · Germanic tribes

1 Introduction

Germanic and Greek cultures made a great contribution to the development of western Europe with their national traits. The Greeks have long been seen as the ancestor of modern European culture, however, the influence and importance of Germanic culture in the forming of European traits nowadays are often not valued. Germanic people were once thought to be bloody barbarians compared with the wise Romans who inherited the wisdom of Greek people. However, having developed their stable and unique features, the Germanic tribes became an influential force in Europe after the collapse of the Roman Empire. That period is often described as a cultural retrogression. However, someone also thought that it is a great rebirth and reshaping of European culture [1]. In recent years, some scholars have investigated the historical and cultural characteristics of Germanic people in many aspects, including political system, legal characteristics, religious beliefs, daily life and so on [2–7]. In addition, other scholars have discussed

the importance of Germanic culture, including rethinking the historical connotation and contemporary value of Germanic civilization from a cross-cultural perspective [8–10].

This paper will firstly analyze the Germanic traits developed since the late first century, corresponding with modern European traits, and point out their importance shown in the history.

2 Germanic Culture Trait

The Greek culture, mostly represented by Athens, was highly renowned for a long time. Beyond all doubt, Greek culture is the main origin of European civilization. Greek culture has a developed philosophical system, which not only produces many theories to discuss important philosophical topics such as the existence of the universe and the value of individuals but also provides a solid foundation for many later disciplines of natural science and social science. Greek philosophers, such as Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, and so on, have a long-term and far-reaching impact on Europeans and even all mankind. Among them, their discussions on human nature, human values, human rights, and other topics are very in-depth. In the process of development, the germination of humanism began to appear, and people's rights have been valued, although there are many other theories. This emphasis on individuals is not groundless. One of the obvious influencing factors is the well-developed commodity economy of ancient Ancient Greece. Frequent commodity trades between individuals caused by geographical location, natural conditions, and other characteristics make them pay more attention to the protection of individual rights in these trading activities [12].

Greek philosophical speculation has also derived a rational way of thinking, which is very important for people to understand and distinguish the world. They established a more systematic knowledge system and opened the era of Europeans' systematic pursuit of wisdom. It plays a great role in improving the knowledge and moral quality of the general public and gives everyone a better chance to give full play to their abilities.

The slavery democracy represented by Athens in Ancient Greece is one of the roots of contemporary western democracy. Although this democratic system does not fully meet the requirements of modern people, it has laid the foundation for the subsequent Western democratic system. To some extent, this political system reflects the importance of Greek Athenian culture to the individual role and individual rights.

Rome inherited Ancient Greece's respect for individual rights, which is particularly reflected in their laws. The studies of all dynasties believe that Roman law has laid a foundation for modern European law, and its content is a typical example of paying attention to private law. Today, a large part of the civil law system is related to this. In this way, it is not difficult to understand why some countries led by the United States have made great efforts to protect human rights.

Compared with the well-organized and sophisticated Greek society, Germanic tribes in the late first century have mostly been described as uncivilized barbarians. They were labeled as demons. Despite the enormous difference compared with Ancient Greece and the Roman Empire, Germanic tribes at that time had developed their own culture.

Different regimes have diverse power operation mechanisms. Roman Empire had a dictator who owns almost everything, and Athenian democratic politics also had citizens

that possessed the most resources. It is clear to see that whoever takes the largest partition of resources takes charge of the power, all of the power comes from distribution. Thus, when we are talking about the form of power, it is actually about how resources are distributed. In a society, a decisive factor affecting the social form is the distribution of resources, which can be observed in the way people gain power. Influenced by objective natural and humanistic factors, Germanic groups have formed a set of distribution mechanisms different from Ancient Greece and Rome.

The power in Germanic tribes was generated and protected from strong interpersonal connections and violent force, which two were the main ways to gain a larger partition of resource distribution, and greatly reflected their national traits.

Unlike modern people who invented documents like contracts, People at that time did not have full-fledged trust mechanisms other than interpersonal connections. People tended to trust people who had been associated with them through a personal relationship. Thus, the leader of the broadest and strongest associated group would gain the most trust and become the most authorized man in a certain group. Power was then generated in a tribe. If the relationship does not fall, the trust and authority would stay, in this way the power would be protected. This is proved by Tacitus's script. In his book *Germania*, he wrote: "The larger a man's kin and the greater the number of his relations by marriage, the stronger his influence when he is old. [12]" A larger partition could be gained and protected violently with a strong force. Violent force is a kind of guarantee that one's power would be stable and long-last. And that is why Tacitus recorded the "strength of limb and size of the body that excites our admiration. [12]" A strong child was the symbol of the strong force. He also wrote that "Renown is more easily won among perils, and you cannot maintain a large body of companions except by violence and war. [12]" Through civil wars in a tribe and conquest of other tribes, power could be acquired and expanded.

The two approaches reflected and impacted the featured customs of Germanic tribes. Emphasis on interpersonal connections contributed to a social system based on a kindred system. However, relationships such as friends were also counted as close ties. In his book *Germania*, Tacitus scripted that a man is bound to take up the feuds as well as the friendships of father or kinsman. In addition, the relationship-based system contributed to their culture too. The Germanic culture was conventional and holistic.

According to Tacitus, "Marriage there is strict...They are almost unique among barbarians in being satisfied with one wife each...adultery is rare in the extreme...shaves her hair and strip her, thrusts her from his house and flogs her throughout the village. [12]" Germanic culture in the late first century laid stress on obedience and Germans had strict rules that people have to carry out traditions and follow the moral standards. If someone was against the rules, he or she would suffer heavy punishments. In addition, we can not ignore the purity and simplicity of Germanic tribes. In *The History of The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, the author mentioned that this system occasionally weakens the size of the Republic, but on the whole, it can stimulate the vitality of the Germanic character and mature the vulnerable virtues of these barbarians. The Germanic people yearned for bravery and chastity. They were one of the few people who established monogamy at that time. It is to maintain such chastity that they set more strict standards and requirements for social norms.

One other outstanding trait is that Germanic people were hospitable. It was mentioned in Tacitus's book that no other nation abandons itself more completely to banqueting and entertainment. It's believed that it was because activities like banquets were crucial ways for them to build social connections. Tacitus told us that "no one shall take up arms until the state has attested that he will be worthy of them" [12]. With a strong link with others and the admiration of their leaders, Germanic tribes were holistic, they were always acting integrally in events like a war. In a word, the Greek culture emphasizes more on individuality more, and Germanic culture emphasizes more on holistic which two people from western Europe were later significantly affected.

Another non-negligible trait is how Germanic tribes emphasize the military spirit. It was said in the book *Germania* that Germani had no taste for peace. Their boys had to join a kind of military training since young, and those who were not warlike would be killed by their tribe. "Traitors and deserters are hanged on trees; the cowardly, the unwarlike, and those who disgrace their bodies are drowned in miry swamps under a cover of wicker.[12]" It was also said that the only kind of public show them was a type of dance performed by naked youth among swords and threatening spears. Influenced by the advocate of violent force, Germanic tribes were relatively intrepid, warlike, and cruel. Their cultural contents were full of ferocity.

Above are original traits formed in the early stage of Germanic history. Despite the truth that Germanic people had already developed a highly characteristic culture, they were still barbarian tribes who were a lack in productivity and the ability in governing a large country. Their starting point of conquering Europe began as the Roman Empire lost control of its territory.

Germanic tribes' invasion of Europe started a new page of European history. Though the period has been mostly seen as a cultural retrogression, it was a rebirth, although it did not intend. The invasion of Germanic tribes destructed the cultural structure established for a long time, but it has been inherited inclusively. Coupled with the continuation of the Eastern Roman Empire, the culture of Ancient Greece and Rome has not been lost, but has been integrated and developed with Germanic and other cultures.

The three aspects that best reflect the importance of Germanic traits in modern European culture were the establishment of feudalism, the unity of thoughts, and the law supplement. These brand new movements somehow promoted the holistic consciousness of European culture and led to the foundation for the autocratic monarchy, the birth of the nation-state, and even the emergence of capitalism.

European feudalism, also known as a feudal fiefdom, was firstly generated and developed during the Frankish Kingdom. The feudal system in Western Europe is a political and economic combined system. The feudal lord first clearly owned the ownership of the land in his fief, and then gradually obtained the local power of the royal power after the decline of the royal power, and transformed it into the hereditary private power with the fief, including administrative, judicial, tax, coinage and other powers. Investigating the origin of the feudal system in Western Europe includes three main factors: Roman civilization, Germanic tradition, and the influence of Christianity. Through the fiefdom system, a feudal hierarchy was gradually formed in Western Europe: king, duke, marquis, count, viscount, baron, and knight. Under this system, the division of grades and the relationship between them are first based on a personal attachment, which is typically

manifested in the system of monarchy and vassal in Western Europe. This land-linked system also contributed to the prevalence of manors in Western Europe. This is a relatively centralized system. Although the secular power was widely and seriously restricted by the church before the religious reform movement, the feudal fiefdom system can form the rule under the Lord, make people have more sense of belonging to the nation and the country, and over time form the basis for the emergence of the nation-state.

If China's feudal unified multi-ethnic country has Confucianism and legalism as the tools of ideological unity, the corresponding subjects in Europe are Christianity and chivalry, which later have a high degree of overlap. Christianity had become the national religion of the Roman Empire in 393 BC. After the establishment of the Frankish Kingdom, the king's secular power needed the certification of Christianity, which used to be the Roman national religion, and Christianity also needed new secular power to support its development and missionary after losing Rome. In this way, the two have formed a mutually beneficial and win-win relationship. Christianity recognized the inheritance status of the Frankish Kingdom, which established Christianity as the national religion. The root of chivalry was the combination of typical Germanic values and Christian doctrines, which reflects the ideological unity of Christianity on secular life to a certain extent. Chivalry was full of the content of Germanic bravery, which urged people at that time to achieve their glory in life and to realize their value. Such a value orientation has striking similarities with the value pursuit of Protestantism and capitalism. I think this is one of its roots. The basic doctrine of Western Christianity became the basis of western politics, and the Protestantism produced by religious reform gave birth to modern western democratic politics to a certain extent. The Christian Church used the theories of "divine supremacy" and "God loves the world" to limit the kingship, which provided a theoretical basis for the supremacy of law and equality before the law; The use of "all the world is guilty" made the king a guilty person, prevented the worship of the emperor and the concept of the supreme good of the country, and laid a theoretical foundation for the later constitutional concept and the theory of separation of powers; Because the church is the leader of the spiritual world, the foundation of the church ultimately depends on the faith of the people. As the people of God, it is undoubtedly God's original intention to pay attention to the individual. Therefore, the church emphasizes "everyone is equal before God", highlights its representativeness through the extensive participation of the people, and leads the people to have indisputable leadership, which presupposes the theoretical premise for the later social contract theory and representative system. The integration and complementarity of Germanic culture and Christianity provide such a powerful spiritual leading force to unify people. At the same time, the contradiction and opposition between religious power and political power provide valuable and limited research space for scholars to absorb knowledge and explore truth from Christian doctrine, Greek and Roman culture, Germanic culture, and other social thoughts.

Germanic law seems to be an important reference object of modern law, especially the original common law in Britain. These laws were only the customary laws of Germanic tribes and gradually formed a system in the mid-5th century, which was called the "barbarian code". Germanic law initially coexisted with Roman law. When used, the application of law adopts the principle of humanism, that is, Germanic law applies to Germanic people and Roman law applies to Roman people. In case of any conflict

between the two, Germanic law shall prevail. Later, the two have a certain degree of mutual integration. Germanic law is an important basis of western legal tradition [13]. The personal principle of Germanic law is the principle mainly or partially adopted in modern countries. Considering the interests of groups and the formation of legal person system in legislation and judicature is influenced by the group standard of Germanic law to a certain extent, the formality of Germanic law affects the establishment of the principle of fault liability, the system of expression of will and essential legal act, the jury system and the form of evidence in litigation. It can be seen that Germanic law has a far-reaching impact on later laws. One of the cores of Germanic law is group standard. According to the provisions of Germanic law, the exercise of rights and obligations of individuals should be bound by groups (families, clans, and communes), not entirely determined by the individual will. For example, as a clan member, when his clan is infringed by a foreign clan, he should carry out blood revenge together with other clan members, which is both an obligation and a right and can not be violated at will. At the same time, in the administration of justice, we also began to pay attention to group interests. This is rare in the original Greek and Roman law. The group standard of Germanic law also provides an ideological and legal basis for the concentration of larger collectives, which is conducive to the formation of autocratic monarchies and the nation-state in Europe. The integration of Germanic culture with Christianity, Greek culture, and some other secondary cultures, gradually established the European character from the collapse of the Western Roman Empire to the emergence of capitalism. The cultural development of later Europe also comes from this.

As just mentioned. Such a value orientation shown in Chivalry, which was the newborn of Germanic and Christian traits, has striking similarities with the value pursuit of Protestantism and capitalism. Also, the integrity valued in Germanic culture has laid a deep foundation for the emergence of the autocratic monarchy nation-state with a high degree of centralization and national identity in politics, economy, and culture.

3 Conclusions

Although Ancient Greece has long been regarded as the origin of European culture, the formation of modern European culture is largely due to the Germanic people in the past. During the reign of the Roman Empire, the Germanic nation resisted the attack of Rome and developed a set of unique cultures according to its model. They emphasize integrity and holistic and emphasize the maintenance of tradition and a kind of naive simplicity. They are martial, but they are full of blood and violence when plundering resources.

Under the guidance of this culture, with the decline of the Roman Empire, they invaded Europe and established their era. This period was usually regarded as a cultural retrogression, but it was the Germanic destruction of the previously declining and rigid culture that allowed the rebirth of European culture.

To a large extent, the Germanic people have influenced the rest of Europe with their character. The original Greek and Roman cultures, especially Greek culture, attached importance to individual rights and power for many reasons, but there were gaps in the overall aspect. Sometimes it lacked some enterprising and radical ideas. The two have played a good complementary relationship. Modern traits of European countries,

in common, are successors and combinations of Greek and Germanic traits along with some other minor cultures. This article will provide some references for those who are interested in Germanic culture.

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