

Tolkien™ in / Tolkien™ and Academia

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We all yearn for more of it, don't we? More writing that touches on the old legends, that takes us out of our modern trivial culture, and that rings true. There are so few works of real depth and power out there – Lewis ends up as pastiche, Le Guin, Jansson and Grahame are juveniles, Wm. Morris is too archaic and preachy, Pullman starts well but can't sustain it (and he is alternate history anyway), and let's not even mention Rowling.¹ Tolkien emulated and was inspired by the legends of Northern Europe, so the way to get more of his kind of writing is to read what he worked so hard to connect with, either when merging his legendarium into ancient writings or through his themes, style, and the stories he tells.

I recently read an excellent survey of Old Germanic literature, which makes a great introduction to the field and is a perfect beginning point for the exploration of runic inscriptions, Germanic paganism, Old English literature, Old Norse literature, and the early medieval legends of northwestern Europe. It gives the non-academic reader a feel for what has survived of the old literature that Tolkien knew and thought about every day. It describes current thinking in Germanic philology and also gives a very nice history of academic discussion on these survivals. This column will look at *Early Germanic Literature and Culture*, edited by Brian Murdoch and Malcolm Read (Camden House Press, Rochester NY:

1. I'm revealing my age and my reluctance to read the new authors. I will curmudgeonly stick to the older fantasy (which I barely read anymore) and European history/folklore, which monopolizes most of my reading these days.

2004).² Because Tolkien never wrote down his thoughts on the culture, religion, and way of life of the ancient Germanic tribes, only those who saw him lecture got a glimpse of his views. For those of us left out of this small group, it is still interesting to see what today's philologists have concluded about the Germanic tribes. This is a taste of the ancient legendary world that has a spark and deeper meaning because it is part of the real world's history. This authenticity is what Tolkien tried to tap into. He was so successful because he could fill in the massive gaps and sustain and personalize his version of ancient stories. In *Early Germanic Literature and Culture* we get a look at the real thing in its sadly fragmented and obscured state.

When I first introduced this column I described three types of publication that will be discussed. In addition to academic publications that are specifically focused on Tolkien's writings (the first two columns in this series), I will also look at current writings in the areas that Tolkien focused on during his life: medieval northern European history, philology, and folklore. This is an opportunity to examine the modern academic perspective on many of the topics and issues that Tolkien thought about and discussed in his teaching and research. Because the philological perspective was so important in Tolkien's myth-making it is interesting to look at the conclusions drawn about the old cultures and literatures by modern academic philologists. The next column will look at the third type of publication that this column will discuss – academic journals that would have been of interest to Tolkien.

One of the more interesting and unique features of this book is that very little of it is devoted to early German-language literature. It spends a good deal of time investigating what is known about the early Germanic world from which German literature sprang. Tolkien spent a good deal of time thinking about this pagan pre-literate culture, working with the same sources that are discussed here. This part of the work includes a chapter on the Latin literature of the origins of the German tribes of Europe, one on the interaction of the *Germanii* with Rome, one on what is known about the pagan religion of the Germans, and one on the oral transmission of literature and mythology prior to writing. After this there are chapters on the primary divisions of a very widely defined "Germanic Literature," Runic inscriptions, Gothic, Old Norse Literature, Old English, Old High and Low German and the Old Saxon Heliand. The book helps the reader understand the culture(s) from which the main strands of Germanic literature sprang and then gives the reader an excellent quick introduction to the basic threads of

2. Try getting this through interlibrary loan. It is pricy (\$85) new or used.

that literature.

The work starts with a very interesting chapter on “The concept of Germanic Antiquity” by Heinrich Beck. This looks at the history of the idea of an ancient Germanic Culture in European intellectual history of the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries. Although the idea of a relatively coherent Germanic culture begins with Tacitus, scholarly discussion of the ancient *Germanii* begins with Jacob Grimm, noted German folklorist and philologist of the first half of the Nineteenth Century. The question of what this culture was called developed some political overtones, as Scandinavian scholars had independently been discussing an ancient Norse culture. Grimm successfully (and with national pride) extended the term Germanic in time and space to encompass the ancient culture from which the Old Norse, Old English and Old German languages and cultures developed. Grimm employed historical linguistic analysis to show how the languages were related and how they separated from Indo-European. For Grimm and the generation following him, this separation and the ancestral home of the Indo-Europeans was thought to have been in Asia. In the first decades of the Twentieth Century, however, just when Tolkien would have first been reading about ancient Germanic culture, the idea arose that the Indo-Europeans actually originated in northwest Europe and that the *Germanii* were their descendants who remained in their ancestral home. This has a deep resonance with Tolkien’s mythology, in which the oldest cultures of Middle-earth are located in the northwest.

The next three articles discuss the relationship between the Romans and the German tribes. One, by Herwig Wolfram, discusses the Latin writings describing the tribe and their origins. It shows that Tacitus set a pattern for such writings and how he struggled with the translation of alien concepts into Latin, setting up linguistic equivalents that were probably not accurate. One tactic employed by Tacitus is to trace the myths and origins of the Germans to important vernacular names in Germanic culture. This became an important tool (in the absence of historical data) for later writers who wanted to present the origins of a tribe. The other important model for the ‘origin writings’ of the earliest Middle Ages is the Old Testament. Cassiodorus’ History of the Goths (completed 533) is then discussed in terms of these models and as historical writing of the times. It was commissioned by Theodoric the Great, a descendant of the Goths who ruled Italy at the time. Jordanes, a Catholic Goth, then revised this history in the 550s. This work gave the Goths an identity and history within the

context of Roman history. The use of legends and ethnic history for nationalistic purposes was not something new in the Nineteenth Century, but had a long history.

Adrian Murdoch discusses the relationship of the *Germanii* with Rome in the first four centuries AD based on both historical/literary sources and archaeology. He discusses the importance of the battle of the Teutoburg Forest, in which the *Germanii* massacred three Roman legions, and how it affected both Germanic and Romance legends and literature. He quotes A. A. Gill who suggested that “the slaughter in the Teutoberger Forest divided Europe into the warm south, who forever saw forests as dreadful places to be avoided and cleared, homes to dragons and trolls, antitheses of the civilized city, and the north, who understood them to be healing, protecting, mystical, spiritual places...” He discusses the military relationships (not always antagonistic), developing trade with Rome, and the mixing of the two societies in the border region. The *Germanii* were fierce fighters, employed as a buffer state by Rome, and also brilliant agriculturalists, who produced large quantities of exportable foodstuffs for the Latin south.

Rudolf Simek describes the pagan religion of the *Germanii* and their conversion to Christianity in his essay. Given that there has been so much junk written on the Germanic pagan religion, both serious and wildly imaginary, you should read through this essay to get a feel for how little is really known. Simek points out that there clearly were multiple religions, that there were major regional differences, and that the writings that survive are heavily biased by a Christian perspective and by over systematization (filling in the many gaps in the authors’ sources). Because of these biases he has emphasized archaeological data, particularly in the earliest part of the record. Late in the pagan period written records have much more importance, but the religion(s) had evolved significantly by then. Literary sources can be most reliably used for the time of the transition to Christianity. There is a period of syncretism, when Christianity is just another belief system that can be added to the Norse pantheon. After that comes the time of conversion, often forcible. At this time authors made efforts to identify parallels between Christian and pagan beliefs.

The traces of oral poetics in the literary remains of early Germanic culture is discussed by R. Graeme Dunphy. He introduces the theory of Oral Formulaic poetry, in which fixed phrases and formulaic descriptions are used in an oral recitation of a narrative poem. These buy

the reciter time as he or she composes the poem anew with each recitation. Dunphy argues that there is ample evidence for a thriving oral culture based on this formulaic approach in the background of virtually all early Germanic literature.

Finally we arrive at literature. The remaining 60 percent of the book is devoted to six introductory essays on the major facets of Germanic literature. They are Runic Inscriptions, Gothic, Old Norse-Icelandic Lit, Old English, Old High German and Old Low German, and finally the Old Saxon *Heliand*. The essays are all excellent and they give the reader a broad overview of each of these areas. There are many leads that are worth following here; I hope it inspires readers to do more digging and read some of the “real thing.” These texts discussed here can be slow going, but with the context provided by these essays the reader can quickly develop a feel for the place of any one work in these different regional literary traditions. We also get a glimpse of how the literatures fit together and sprang from the same tradition. This work gives us a picture of the real literature, with huge amounts lost forever, and its confusions, contradictory traditions and difficulties. This body of written material is the real model for what Tolkien was trying to do as he constructed his legendarium, with its multiple voices, lost material, and ancient tradition. This book gives the reader an easy entry into this area of literature as well as a good deal of insight into Tolkien’s thinking and view of the world.

There is a final item to investigate in this volume. The bibliography is a treasure trove of material to explore. It is divided into primary and secondary texts. Three pages of original source material anthologies are followed by 11 pages of primary sources by individual authors. When available, the editors have cited both original language editions and English translations. This is a great resource for following up on what has been introduced in this work. Authors from Adam of Bremen’s *History of the Archbishops of Hamburg-Bremen* to *Yngvar’s Saga* translated by Hermann Pálsson are listed. In this listing you will find where to go for a recent translation of Alfred the Great, Bede, Tatian or Tacitus. These are great texts to rummage around in, read on your own, and draw your own conclusions. They are hard to read straight through, of course, but investigating pieces here and there (in translation) gives us all a feel for what Tolkien knew and worked with in his teaching and writing (in the original languages). Start with this bibliography and go pester the interlibrary loan desk.