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Goths and Huns:
the rediscovery of the Northern cultures in the nineteenth century

by T. A. Shippey

The paper which follows may be seen most readily as a response to E.G. Stanley's monograph, *The Search for Anglo-Saxon Paganism* (Cambridge, 1975). In this work Professor Stanley studied the history of the reception of Old English literature and its effect on scholars during the nineteenth and much of the twentieth century; and came to the rueful conclusion that "for a long time Old English literature was much read in the hope of discovering in it a lost world of pre-Christian antiquity, for the reconstruction of which the Old English writings themselves do not provide sufficient fragments" (my italics). The evidence amassed makes this conclusion incontestable. It remains possible, however, to feel doubt over the last words of the monograph, which point to the persistence of romantic attitudes in scholars, and declare that "Tracing to its origins the error on which these attitudes are based may perhaps help to eradicate them". The origins of the search for the "lost world" of Germanic prehistory should not be confused with the first manifestations of it; nor was its appeal confined only to scholars, though without scholarship the appeal would not have existed. The questions which this paper seeks in part to answer are how images of the past were created by nineteenth century philology, and why there should be a particular charm for scholars and creative authors alike in "the unknown", even, as Professor Stanley calls it, "the unknowable unknown".

A twentieth-century example makes several points with particular specificity.1 In J.R.R. Tolkien's fantasy *The Lord of the Rings* (London, 1954–5), a prominent part is played by a people known as "the Riders of

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1 There is a more extensive discussion of some of the points which follow in my book on Tolkien, *The Road to Middle-Earth* (forthcoming, London, 1982). This paper however concentrates more fully on the word "emnet" and its implications.
Rohan”, or of “the Riddermark”. As has often been noticed, this race is Anglo-Saxon by language, nomenclature, and in most respects by behaviour: the fragments of their language quoted are in Old English, their names are usually Old English words capitalised, as with the king “Théoden”, the hall “Meduseld”, and the sword “Herugrim”, while the whole sequence of the visitors’ approach to their king in Volume 2, chapter 6, is most closely modelled on lines 229–404 of Beowulf. As has less often been noticed, though, the “Riders” are different from historical Anglo-Saxons in one vital respect, namely their fascination with horses. They call themselves “Éotheod”, “the horse-people”, use personal names such as “Éowyn”, “horse-joy”, and have as their main rank below the king that of “Marshal”, a word derived, as the Oxford English Dictionary tells us, from Old French mareschal but before that from Old Teutonic *maurho-skalko-z, “horse-servant”. By contrast the Anglo-Saxons seem determinedly pedestrian. There might have been a word *mearh-scealc in Old English, but it is not recorded. Meanwhile the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle gloomily reports that at the battle of Hereford in 1055 “the English army fled before a spear was thrown, because they were on horseback”; perhaps coincidentally, the fragment of the poem on The Battle of Maldon opens with the English commander ordering his men to drive away their horses and go into battle on foot. This particular difference between the Anglo-Saxons of history and their fictional analogues is especially marked, and one may wonder whether it has any basis or motive.

Certainly it does not appear to be mere free invention. A very strong clue lies in the first word from the Riders’ language quoted in the fantasy, the place-name “Eastemnet” used by the narrator in Volume 2, chapter 2: “the Horse-lords had formerly kept many herds and studs in the Eastemnet, this easterly region of their realm”. A few pages later we hear of “the Westemnet”. And if “east” and “west” are mere prefixes, one is left with the word “emnet”, a word whose status is in several respects typical of the “lost worlds” and fantasies of reconstruction derived by philologists from scanty material from the nineteenth century on. “Emnet” is not listed in the Oxford English Dictionary. It is in Bosworth and Toller’s Anglo-Saxon Dictionary, glossed as “level ground” or “plain”. However it can also be found in The Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Place-Names, under the heading Emneth (Norfolk), a name explained by the editor, Eilert Ekwall, as derived either from Æmenan-gemylpe, “the mouth of the river Æmene”, or else (since the Æmene is totally conjec-
ultural) from Old English *mǽp*, “meadow”, prefixed by *efn* or *eman*, “smooth”. What has this to do with the Riders and the Riddermark? In brief, one may well surmise that Professor Tolkien at some point asked himself why modern English has no native word for the concept “steppe” or “prairie”, no word corresponding to the German *Ebene, Grasebene*; concluded, reasonably enough, that it is because the thing itself is unknown in a small and densely-wooded island; but noted that a form of a native word had indeed survived, not by coincidence, in the flattest and most prairie-like of all the English counties, Norfolk. If, then, the Anglo-Saxons had been familiar with the plains of North-West Europe (instead of emigrating to England), they would have called them “em-nets”; and if they had had to use “emnet” as an everyday word for a familiar landscape, it is only reasonable to assume that their attitude to horses would have been much more receptive!

Suppositions of this nature may appear to have no value; they are indeed ventures into the unknown and unknowable. However one may say that latent in the history of “emnet” there lies a thesis about the effect of landscape on history and culture. That Tolkien brooded upon this thesis is confirmed, as it happens, by a further linguistic oddity embedded by him in his fictional account of the Riders’ ancestry; in this (see *Lord of the Rings* Vol. 3, Appendix A iv), several names, such as Vidugavia, Vidumavi, and Vinitharya, are not Old English at all, but Gothic, Latinized spellings of *Widugauja*, “wood-dweller”, *Widumawi*, “woodmaid” and *Winithaharjis*, perhaps “Wend-host”. In his posthumously published *Unfinished Tales* we find also *Marhwin*, a word which could interestingly be either Gothic, “horse-friend”, or Old English (in an Anglian dialect) with the same meaning. It is as if Tolkien had remembered, in his broodings on words, that “horse-folk” *par excellence*, the *equitatus Gothorum*, “the cavalry of the Goths”, and had noted furthermore the once close kinship, linguistic and presumably racial and behavioural, between ancient English and ancient Goths. One group had turned west, to lasting survival on their wooded island, and one east, to the steppes of Russia and the Ukraine, and to eventual oblivion. What

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2 The point is made by Christopher Tolkien in his edition of his father’s *Unfinished Tales* (London, 1980), p.311. The first and third names are discussed in Theodor Mommsen’s edition of Jordanes’ *Historia Getica* (Berlin, 1882), done for the *Monumenta Germaniae Historica* series.
would the English have been like had they turned the other way? And what image would the Goths present, if any of their literature had survived for us to form a judgement? An answer to both is given in Tolkien's picture of the Riders of Rohan, with their English names and Gothic history, their English word for Gothic landscape, their highly un-English adaptation to grasslands and horses.

The Riders, one may say, are a “reconstructed” culture, just as “emnet”, in modern English, is a “reconstructed” word – one which does not exist and has not survived, but which could have survived (if English resistance to foreign imports had been greater), and which could be said to exist, as a name (leeched of all but particular meaning). The process of “reconstruction” is of course to philologists a familiar one, marked by the universal use of the “*”, for a word never recorded but which the philologist genuinely believes to have existed; and it is the genuineness of the belief on which one should concentrate. Professor Tolkien no doubt did not believe in the real prehistoric existence of his “Riders”. However he may very well have believed in the existence of something very like them. It is true that the evidence for early Gothic culture (as it has been discussed in this paper so far) rests on no more than a handful of words, or non-words, a sense of linguistic kinship, and a certain response to early texts such as Beowulf. However behind these scraps there lies a technique, developed with increasing confidence by Tolkien’s professional predecessors; and even a tradition. Under the heading philolog in the Deutsches Wörterbuch originated by Jacob Grimm, one finds Grimm himself being cited:

Man kann alle philologen, die es zu etwas gebracht haben, in solche theilen, welche die worte um der sachen, oder die sachen um der worte willen treiben . . . ich mich lieber zu den ersteren halte.

Others besides Tolkien started from words, but went beyond them.

To return to the nineteenth century, we can find very close analogues to Tolkien’s fictional practice in two romances written by William Morris, The House of the Wolfings (1888) and The Roots of the Mountains (1889).³

³ Quotations are from The Collected Works of William Morris, Vols. 14 and 15 respectively (London, 1912).
Reaction to these has always been mixed, but it is fair to say that such critical praise as they have had has been vague. They represent "the epic or Icelandic side of the author's imagination", writes one critic; Morris was trying "to reproduce the old sagas", declares another. 4 Morris's own daughter wrote that in these two romances "my father seems to have got back to the atmosphere of the sagas", adding by way of a further disclaimer that "after the Wolfings came out" a German professor "wrote and asked learned questions about the Mark, expecting, I fear, equally learned answers from our Poet who sometimes dreamed realities without having documentary evidence of them". 5 However, though his critics seem to use "the sagas" as a generic description for anything pre-Norman, Morris may have had better evidence, if not "documentary evidence", than they realised, as also a more developed historical and geographical sense than they themselves show.

He took pains, admittedly, to avoid anachronistically direct datings and placings. The ordinary reader of 1889, opening *The Roots of the Mountains*, might well have assumed he was about to read a romance about early England. He would find on page 1 a description of a valley set among mountains, with in the valley "a town or thorp", and in the town a tower; the tower is called "the burg", and so the town is "Burgstead", and the valley "the Dale" or "Burgdale". There is no "Burgstead" in the *Oxford Dictionary of English Place-Names*, but there is a "Burstead" in Essex, while thorps, dales, fells and tofts are all perfectly familiar (and strongly localised) in the north of England. The people of Burgdale might then be taken to be English, at least for a while: but before long it becomes clear that some other place and time must be intended. The mountains, for one thing, have glaciers on them, as English fells do not. Furthermore the pine-woods are full of enemies. The main action of *The Roots of the Mountains* is of war, between the Burgdalers, who are tall and fair, and a race of invaders, who are not. It is the description of these invaders - called throughout the romance "the Dusky Men" - which indeed allows us first to guess at the kind of source from which Morris drew, and second at the precise historical (or philological) setting into which he placed his imaginary story.

The first description of "the Dusky Men" says that they were:


5 May Morris, "Introduction" to Vol. 14 of the *Collected Works*, p.xxv.
short of stature, crooked-legged, long-armed, very strong for their size: with small blue eyes, snubbed-nosed, wide-mouthed, thin-lipped, very swarthy of skin, exceeding foul of favour. (p. 88)

Most of the features listed there – short stature, strength, small eyes, darkness and ugliness – are also to be found in one passage of Jordanes’ Historia Getica, which declares that the race which fell on Ermanaric the Goth inspired panic:

because their swarthy aspect was fearful, and they had, if I may call it so, a sort of shapeless lump, not a head, with pin-holes rather than eyes ... They are short in stature, quick in bodily movement, alert horsemen, broad shouldered, ready in the use of bow and arrow, and have firm-set necks which are ever erect in pride. 6

Even the snub-noses are to be found later, in Jordanes’ description of Attila. For Jordanes is describing the Huns, and there can be no doubt that Morris meant his invaders to be the same people. Furthermore, if the “Dusky Men” are Huns, it seems very likely that the “Burgdalers” are meant to be Goths. By failing to say so plainly, Morris was perhaps trying, not to give his story the air of a “Never-never Land”, but to suggest how events might seem to a people without maps or written history, and with very limited horizons. He may also have welcomed the possible confusion, for an ordinary reader of 1889, between the Burgdalers as Goths and the Burgdalers as Englishmen. Like Tolkien, Morris was prepared to promote the Goths to “very-much-the-same-as-English” status; certainly he meant his readers to take their side. For all its lack of dates and places, then, and in spite of the fact that “the roots of the mountains” themselves have no names, Morris’s romance of 1889 could arguably be called a “historical novel”, and even assigned to a century: not the “second or third”, as Mackail guesses (op.cit., II, 213, changing his mind next page to not later than the seventh), but the fourth, when Goths and Huns first came into conflict somewhere in eastern Europe.

Jordanes had of course been known to Gibbon, and before. There is

nothing distinctively novel, or philological, about drawing on him for a passage in a novel. 7 Narrower inferences may be drawn, more easily at least, from Morris's earlier story of The House of the Wolfings. In this he is unequivocal about labelling the "Wolfings" as Goths, and in giving many more details about the war between Goths on one hand, and on the other Romans, with both Gothic and Burgundian allies. The date implied seems once again to be round the end of the fourth century, earlier if one stresses the defensive posture of the Goths, later if one pays heed to the hero Thiodolf's memory of having fought and beaten three kings of the Huns. 8 Further hints of datability, it not date, come from the vague memory repeated within the romance of an early expedition against the Romans, carried out in alliance with "the Kymry" and recorded in "the South-Welsh Lay"; possibly Morris is attempting to identify the "Cimbri" and "Teutones" who invaded Italy in the time of Marius, and to imagine how memory of their expedition might have been preserved in non-Roman tradition, in the tradition of the other side. However one comes closer to philology proper, as often, by considering single words: it is thus significant that Thiodolf recalls fighting his Hun-kings "in the hazelled field" (my italics), a verb not recorded in the OED at any date, and in all probability a borrowing from the "Goths and Huns" section of the Hervarar saga, to be discussed below. More prominent is Morris's declaration, on page 2 of his story, that it was set in the clearings "amidst of the Mirkwood", and that the clearings were called the "Marks". As one can see from the OED, this latter word (in the sense of "tract of land") had no currency at all in England between the Anglo-Saxon period and its use in John Kemble's philological speculations of 1848. For Morris to use it, indeed to centre his story on it, is a clear case of scholarship affecting fiction. Indeed one may say that just as "emnet" was a creative flashpoint for Tolkien's Riders, so the "Mark" and the "Mirkwood" (and the relationship between them) point clearly to the texts which generated Morris's Wolfings.

7 Though the standard edition of Jordanes had come out only seven years before, see note 2 above.
8 There is some slight difficulty in Morris's remark that "the condition of the people" (in Roots of the Mountains) "is later (whatever their date may be) than that of the Wolfings", see Collected Works Vol. 15, p.xi; for Thiodolf, in the earlier work, can remember fighting the Huns who have just appeared in the later one. Morris may have thought of "the Dale" as more secluded than "the Mark".
“Mirkwood” is now familiar enough as a name (largely from Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings*); but it also causes modern scholars no difficulty. Hans Kuhn, in the glossary to his corrected version of Gustav Neckel’s edition of the *Edda* (Heidelberg, 1968), translates *myrceþor* as *dunkelwald ... auch name, u. von diesem schwer abzugrenzen.* As a name it is encountered some seven times in the poems of the *Edda*, though in one or two cases (as Dronke notes, 1969) it seems to have lost any precise meaning: when in the *Locasenna* Loki says to Freyr that he will miss his sword “when the sons of Muspell Loki ride over Mirkwood”, he means by “Mirkwood” nothing more definite than “the world, the edge of the world”. In the poem *Atlakviða*, however, there is at least a hint of actual location; the Hunnish messenger says to the Burgundian kings that Attila has sent him on his errand over *Myrceþor inn ókunna*, “the pathless Mirkwood”, while later he offers them as an inducement “the plain of broad Gnitaheithr”:

\[
\text{stórar meiðmar oc staði Danpar,}
\text{hrís þat íþ moera, er meðr Myrceþor kalla}
\]

(vast treasures and homesteads on the Dnieper, the famous wood that men call Mirkwood.)

Mirkwood is accordingly – so Detter and Heinzell in their edition of 1903 – between Huns and Burgundians, but belonging to the Huns.

After more than a hundred and fifty years of scholarship, it is perhaps hard for modern readers to realise how troublesome some of these Eddic passages seemed to those pioneers who were obliged to edit and translate them first. A few stanzas after the two passages just quoted we come upon what is at least a perturbation in the clear line of the *Atlakviða*. The Burgundian kings ride on their journey to the Huns, and as one might expect, pass over the “fells” or mountains, and also:

\[
\text{Myrceþor inn ókunna;}
\text{hristiz oll Húnmore, þar er hárðmódgar fóro.}
\]

⁹ All quotations of the *Edda* are from the edition of Gustav Neckel and Hans Kuhn (Heidelberg 1962, 1968).
(through untracked Mirkwood. All Hunmark shuddered as the stern ones passed.)

The translation just given is that of Ursula Dronke, in 1969, which makes no difficulty of myrc = “dark”, viðr = “wood”, and mœrc = “mark” or “province”. To the first editors of the Edda as a whole, in 1818, matters did not seem so clear: they were obliged to render the lines above as *per opacam sylvam illam ignotam. Concussa est universa Hunnorum sylva* . . . and in so doing to give one translation (sylva) for two words (viðr, mœrc), while offering no account at all of the relationship, if any, between the similar sounds of mœrc and myrc. There is no attempt to make even limited sense out of the geography of *Atlakviða* and the realms of the Huns. As for Mirkwood, it is left for others to explore: *Germani horum locorum mystae rem melius decreverint* “the Germans will have better perceived the status (?) of these places”.

These passages attracted the eye of the indefatigable Jacob Grimm, on whose comments all later editions and translations are based, at however many removes. In his essay of 1843, on “Deutsche Grenzalterthümer”, he addressed himself with typical boldness to questions of beauty and propriety as well as semantic change. He began, naturally, with words:

> Meine ganz folgende untersuchung hat von einer durchsicht der verschiedenen wörter auszugehn, mit welchen der eben entwickelte begriff der grenze bezeichnet wird.

Modern words, however, would not do. *Grenze*, he thought, was not:

> der echte ausdruck. Unser älteres schöneres wort lautete *marka* . . . ahd. marcha, alts. marka, ags. mearc, und aus der bedeutung grenze sehen wir es allmählich vorschreiten in die des abgegrenzten landes oder dazu verwandten zeichens.

Frontier, province, landmark: these meanings are all related to each other. However the existence of Old Norse *mœrk* (feminine), “a wood”,

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11 The two quotations above are from p.376 and p.365 respectively of Edda Sæmundar, ed. G.J. Thorkelin et al., Vol. 2 (Copenhagen, 1818).
and Old Norse mark (neuter), “a boundary”, lead Grimm back to consideration of the Edda, Mirkwood, and Hunmark. Perhaps “wood” was the original meaning, he decides, with that of “frontier” attached at a very early stage because of the fact that forests so often in reality indicated the limits of kingdoms and their power. The Eddic Hunmørk means no more than Hunenland, and shows wie frühe die vorstellung silva übertrat in die von limes und regio.  

Something very like this discussion, one can see, lies behind Morris’s House of the Wolfings. In that romance Morris has taken the word “mark”, and given it one of Grimm’s meanings: it means “land, our land”. However since the land is a clearing in an enormous wood, the word is associated also with what Grimm thought was the original meaning, of “forest”. As for Mirkwood, which Grimm had allowed to stand as “dark forest” simply because in sprache und poesie der schwarze, dunkle wald sein gutes recht hat, Morris gives no translation of it, but cuts the Gordian knot of interpretation by implying that if “Mark” means “land, our land”, then “Mirkwood” is “the wood our land is in, the wood we have cut our land out of”. A name known only from heroic poetry, and known as a puzzle even within heroic poetry, has been made by Morris both as simple and as homely as possible. At the same time the “Markmen” have not been removed from the context of heroic poetry. Their wood is still a Grenzwald in which armies and races clash; their milieu, it is implied, is the one from which such later songs as the Atlakvída could spring.  

One can see, between 1818 and 1889, the tangled way in which “lost worlds” of Germanic prehistory were “reconstructed” from words and fragments: first a couple of names, then a handful of words, then an attempt to show under what circumstances the words could have come to mean different things, then increasingly positive statements about the historical and geographical implications of the names (which made it inevitable that someone would eventually base a thesis on locating them 13) — and, before the process reached its climax, an attempt by Morris

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12 The three quotations above are from Jacob Grimm, Kleinere Schriften, Vol. 2, Berlin 1865, pp.31–3.
to “feel his way back” from words and names to description of a country and a social condition. This last is romantic enough, and no doubt deeply erroneous. Yet one must repeat that however erroneous the conclusions and the “lost worlds”, the process of philological reconstruction itself offered plausibility and claimed truth. The conclusion of Professor Stanley, quoted at the start of this paper, that in the end there was not enough to go on, is powerful only retrospectively. To Grimm, to Morris, to Tolkien and to many others, it must have seemed that there was very nearly enough to go on; in any case philologists excelled in wringing as much as possible out of fragmentary evidence. It has to be added that ponderings over Mirkwood did not end with Atlakviða, Grimm and the Wolfings. One may still wonder what took Morris from Mirkwood and the Wolfings to the Burgdalers and “the roots of the mountains”. Which mountains? Once again, the answer seems to be in the Edda, or rather in the Edda Minor, specifically in the poem known as “the Battle of the Goths and Hunns”, the Hunnenschlachtlied, or the Hlöðskviða and found in fragmentary and interpolated form only in the Hervarar saga, mentioned once already.

This poem, with its explanatory prose interpolations, completes the seven references to Mirkwood given by Neckel and Kuhn. The saga in which it is embedded tells the story of how King Heithrek of Hreithgotaland leaves two sons, one called Angantýr, a Goth on both sides of his family tree, and one called Hlóthr, son of Sifka, a Hunnish princess. On the death of Heithrek the half-Hunnish son asks for a share of his father’s inheritance, but is refused; has an alternative offer made him, but in insulting fashion—Angantýr’s counsellor Gizurr says when he hears it, that it is “A bountiful offer / for a bondmaid’s child — / child of a bondmaid, / though born to a king!”14 At this Hlóthr takes offence, returns to his grandfather the Hunnish king, and with him and a vast army marches on the Goths. They ride through skóg þann er Myrkviðr heitir, er skíl Húnaland ok Gotaland, “the forest called Mirkwood, which divided the land of the Huns from the land of the Goths.” After a preliminary battle, a challenge and reply, the main battle is joined; and in this Hlóthr the half-Hun is defeated and killed by his Gothic brother.

14 All quotations and translations from this work are from The Saga of King Heidrek the Wise, ed. and trans. Christopher Tolkien (London, 1960).
This sequence of prose and poetry attracted great attention during the
nineteenth century and after, as its difficulties and tantalising hints of
information became more apparent. One point that struck scholars was
that in this context Mirkwood was quite definitely a frontier, and labelled
as such by the saga-writer; the circumstance kept Grenzwald alive as a
translation alternative to Dunkelwald. Another was that parts of the poem
on "The Battle of the Goths and Huns", or Hlǫðskviða, were very similar
to the Atlakviða, though in a different context. Where the Hunnish
messenger in the Atlakviða offered:

stórar meiðmar oc staði Danpar,
hríð þat íþ moera, er meðr Myrvið kalla,

the Hunnish prince in the Hlǫðskviða demanded:

hríð þat íþ mæra, er Myrvioðr heitir,
grof þá ina helgu, er stendr á Gotþjóðu,
stein þann inn fagra, er stendr á stóðum Danpar

(the renowned forest that is named Mirkwood, the hallowed grave in
Gothland standing, the fair-wrought stone beside the Dnieper.)

Each poem shared the same line, in close proximity to which was the rare
place-name of the Dnieper, while also common was the assumption that
Mirkwood was a "debatable land". However if one took a literal view of
the two poems, Mirkwood must have changed hands. In Atlakviða it is a
Hunnish possession, to be given away, in Hlǫðskviða a Gothic one, to be
claimed. The hints of a possible historicity in this discrepancy were
tantalising, though they led no further.

However the most striking place-name for scholars in this section of the
Hervarar saga was not a wood, but a mountain – which takes us back to
the question of William Morris. King Heithrek does not meet a natural
death, but is murdered by his slaves, whom Angantýr accordingly seeks
out for his revenge. Eventually he comes on them fishing, and one of them
uses a sword – Tyrting, taken from King Heithrek – to cut off a fish's head.
As he does so, he says:
Pess galt hon gedda fyir Grafa, er Heidrek var veginn undir Harvada fjollum.

The pike has paid / by the pools of Grafa / for Heidrek’s slaying under Harvad-fells.)

Angantýr recognises the sword, and the men, and kills them. But it was not the story of vengeance which made this passage famous among philologists, but the place-name, undir Harvada fjollum. It should be noted that, as with Hunmorc and the 1818 edition of Atlavida, to pre-philological editors the phrase was virtually intractable. In his 1785 edition of the saga Stefán Björnsson could only translate, Hoc mali lucius passus est, ante ostium omnis Greipæae quod Heidreus interfactus sit, sub Havada fiollis, adding then in parenthesis (montibus strepitus). He took the name to be a form of the noun hávadi, “tumult”, though there was no special reason for identifying a range of “tumult-mountains”.

A hundred years later the phrase seemed very different: not as it stood, but as it was “reconstructed”. If one assumes that Harvad- has over the centuries been affected in the same way as other Norse words by the First Consonant Shift, as tabulated in Grimm’s Law, one can work back to an original *karpat-; which suggests strongly that the mountains under which Heithrek was killed were the Carpathians. If he was killed there, he and his son presumably ruled there; the philologist has then come upon strong evidence for the location of the kingdom of the Goths, on whose boundary lay Mirkwood, with beyond that the kingdom of the Huns. Undir Harvada fjollum was in any case first translated as “under the Carpathian hills” by Gudbrand Vigfusson and F. York Powell in their edition of the Corpus Poeticum Boreale (Oxford, 1883), of which Morris certainly owned a copy. It seems likely, then, that in Morris’s mind as he wrote The Roots of the Mountains was not “the wonderful land about the foot of the Italian Alps” as his daughter rather enthusiastically wrote in the introduction already cited, but the valleys of the Carpathians: and not the real valleys

18 Hervarsarsaga ok Heidrekskongs, ed. Stefán Björnsson (Copenhagen, 1785), p.183.
16 It is recorded in a catalogue of books owned by Morris and sold by Hodgson and Co., July 6th 1939. It is odd that Vigfusson and Powell make so little of the equation, merely translating without comment; perhaps it was not original to them, though I have found no earlier reference. Only Christopher Tolkien has spelled out its importance, in The Saga of King Heidrek, p.xxiii.
(in the sense that he felt any obligation to know any details about them),
but rather a "lost world" tinged with the sense of age, of memory, and yet
of buried truth which this one phrase and its reconstruction between them
create so vividly.

The equation of Harvað- and *karpat- appealed, indeed, to scholars in a
way one can call aesthetic. It echoes verlockend wie ein Sirenenlied,
declared H. Meyer in the sober pages of Zeitschrift für deutsches Altertum,
1901. It was philological, both corroborating and depending on Grimm's
Law; it was excellent evidence, since the equation would have been
impossible to the saga-author and he could not have been able to forge it;
it hinted at an immense chain of transmission down the years, from the
fourth- or fifth-century milieu of war between the Goths and the Huns to
the fourteenth-century date of the earliest Hervarar saga manuscripts. Its
existence tended very strongly to authenticate the other passages cited,
about the "renowned forest" of Mirkwood, the "hallowed grave in
Gothland", the "fair-wrought stone beside the Dnieper". Opinion on the
subject, finally, is crystallised in the remarks, at once romantic and
severely scholarly, of Christopher Tolkien in his edition of the saga in
1960:

the matter of legend has roots, however much transformed by poets,
and though no actual corresponding event has been found in the
meagrely recorded history of those times, and surely never will be, in
such things as the "grave" and the "stone" on the banks of the Dnieper
one is probably being taken back a thousand years even beyond
Heiðreks Saga to the burial-place of Gothic kings in south-eastern
Europe and the high stone in their chief place, on which the king
stepped to have homage done to him in the sight of all the people.
(p.xxv)

It is of course appropriate that the author of that passage should be the
son of the author of The Lord of the Rings, with which this paper began:
the dual point of the whole discussion so far of Grimm and the Tolkien,
of Morris and Mirkwood and the mountains of the Goths and Huns, has
been that in the nineteenth century men who were not scholars could find
inspiration, of a sophisticated kind, in the detailed discoveries of scholar-
ship; while on the other the "reconstructing" processes of philology, with
their insidious capacity to stretch from single words to whole histories,
could not themselves be anything but intensely romantic. It is true that philology has since failed to reach a wider audience (which is why Morris's critics seem so linguistically naive). However, for a time the "lost worlds" were very nearly in focus, all but irresistibly appealing.

Many examples could be added, to show the penetration even of popular literature by learned reconstructions. One might note, for instance, the existence of a paraphrase of a fornaldbarsaga, the Hrolfs saga Kraka, published in 1973 by a well-known science fiction author, Poul Anderson. Before the wave of imitations of The Lord of the Rings another heroic fantasy drawing on Old English and Old Norse made some reputation, namely The Well of the Unicorn, by Fletcher Pratt (1948). In 1971 a book by R.A. Lafferty, called The Fall of Rome, devoted itself to strange panegyric on the Goths. On the other side, the romanticism of scholarship has produced several works still readable, in a way, as entertainment, because of their determined attempts to create a setting or a world into which their philological constructs could plausibly fit. The line began with Wilhelm Grimm’s Die deutsche Heldensage (1st edition Gutersloh, 1829). It continued with several books which tried, for instance, to explain how stories about the Goths of the fourth century, presumably composed in Gothic, could have made their way across Europe to Scandinavia and to Germany, and why what were presumably the same events and people should often have emerged in such different forms. R. Heinzel argued in his Ueber die Hervararsaga of 1887 that the place of transit could have been the court of the Byzantine Emperor, where men of the Varangian Guard might have mixed with the descendants of the Ostrogoths still living in the Crimea.\(^{17}\) Caroline Brady’s The Legends of Ermanaric (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1943) preferred to lay a trail for Gothic stories through Italy, or along the amber-route to the Baltic, concerned as it did so to explain why the Hamðismál had managed to delete all mention of Huns. Between 1928 and 1934 Hermann Schneider’s Germanische Heldensage tried to fit all possible evidence together, noting among much else how in all echoes of the war with the Huns place-names like the

\(^{17}\) R. Heinzel, Ueber die Hervararsaga (Sitzungsberichte der K. Akademie der Wissenschaften, Vol. 114), Vienna 1887, p. 475 ff.

5 The Medieval Legacy
Dnieper ragen wie Gespenster ... den Bereich der einstigen Gotenherrschaf kennzeichend. 18

Enquiries of this kind are now, on the whole, discredited. Scholars like Schneider had to use too high a proportion of speculation, because the fragments they were working from - nearly all marginal to the historical centre of their interests - were simply not enough (as Professor Stanley concluded of the parallel quest for "paganism" in the passage already cited). Nevertheless the attraction of these researches is still alive, can still be felt. One notes it, for instance, in Ursula Dronke's pages on "Atlakviða and History" in her Eddic edition of 1969. Why is the death of Atli in the late Norse poem so similar, in some respects, to the contemporary account of Priscus, and yet so different in being a tale of murder rather than of accident? There is a relatively early version in which Attila was murdered, she notes:

What Attila's guard, catching sight of the body in the blood-stained bed, must have thought - "the Khan has been murdered by the woman" - and then disproved by examination of the corpse, has usurped the place of fact. It is as if ... some, on hearing the true account of his death, had said "I do not believe he died like that: the woman killed him - was she not a German?" (op.cit., p.32)

So Burgundian poets, seeking some salve for the destruction of their country by the Huns, could have made the tale one of revenge. "Must have", "as if": the phrases mark the trail of the "reconstructor"! On the other hand the "reconstruction" is a good one; it takes in all the data; if "asterisk-words" can be accepted, "asterisk-cultures" and (as in this case) "asterisk-lays" gain added plausibility. But the true strength, or charm, of such passages as Mrs Dronke's is that they offer us a history in a sense truer, even, than such contemporary Greek accounts as that of Priscus. Her hypothesis is history from a particular angle; history containing an old perspective, coloured by the feelings of the Burgundians; it tells us not about Attila as he was, or as he may have been, but as he seemed. One might add that perhaps the most romantic of all philological revisions of old data was the perception, at some time in the nineteenth century, that the name of the Hunnish king himself, Attila, was not Hunnish at all, but

the Gothic diminutive of *atta*, “father”, *atti-la*, “little father”! Again one comes on new perspective, on history as it was felt: clearly the Scourge of God found some adherents, some defenders even in Germanic heroic tradition. The temptation to imagine what they said about him, to put this together with the mixed feelings of Angantyr in the *Hlöðskviða*, to start “reconstructing”, may be improper, but remains alluring.

Between the time of the first (often baffled) editors of Edda and saga, and our own growing professionalised scepticism, Germanic philology open up something of a “Wonderland” of hints, ghosts, echoes and Sirens. Some aspects of these have been mentioned: many others – the relation between the “Goths and Huns” and *Widsith*, the history of the Scyldings and *Beowulf*, the whole tangled web of theories as to the growth of the *Nibelungenlied* – have necessarily been omitted. However it should be clear that for many in the nineteenth century and after, apprehension of the past was made *qualitatively different* by philology. They did not read accounts of the Goths and Huns; they inferred them; but they thought (with some reason) that their methods of inference were reliable and sound. It remains to ask whether the re-creations of a William Morris (or a Tolkien, or a German professor asking scholarly questions about the Mark) appear actually better than those of less learned appreciators of the past. Was this legacy of the Middle Ages a fruitful one?

There are strong reasons for replying “No”. One conclusion about medieval legacies (it is stimulated in part by the evidence of other papers at this symposium) is that in the past we have a tendency to see ourselves, as we are, but healed of contemporary traumas: so the German *Kleinadel* looked back at the *Nibelungenlied* and saw themselves given worthy employment, so Denmark and Sweden looked back at the Vikings and saw themselves victorious and dominant. William Morris, meanwhile, produced his fantasies of almost-Englishmen living in egalitarian communities where leaders were elected and even slaves were content with their lot, and saw, all too clearly, a past vision of *riches without industry, and so without guilt*! This was a powerful image, in its time; but we are now conscious mostly of its wish-fulfilment. A more ominous note comes from

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the way in which Morris leant on the linguistic connections and affiliations discovered during the nineteenth century to produce a scheme in which the Goths (who were nearly English because their language was “Germanic”) were totally different by race, almost by species, from their “dusky” enemies. The phrase “almost by species” is exact, for at one moment in The Roots of the Mountains Morris has his characters explain that though the Huns may rape their Germanic slaves, and have children by them, “all or most of the said children favoured the race of their begetters” (op.cit., p. 203). There are, in short, no “half-breeds” to complicate the issue. In this convenient thesis one may well see a reflection of theories developed during the spread of the British Empire to prevent infiltration of the rulers by the ruled. The contribution of Germanic philology to racism was unintentional, but still strong; in view of the results it is not surprising that no scholar has had the heart to assess it fully.20

Using the past to soothe or to validate the present remains a temptation, then, and mere knowledge of words or of languages can be no shield against it. Nevertheless it remains possible to feel that the philological view of the Dark Ages, whatever its mistakes, did mark a genuine step forward. There can be no doubt that the researches of the nineteenth century totally altered our view of the nature of language, and added a new element to estimates of what human beings can do. In a similar way it increased our estimation of what human beings, even illiterate ones, can retain. Where Edward Gibbon, in the eighteenth century, had dismissed the possibility of Gothic histories with the lofty remark that “the memory of past events cannot long be preserved, in the frequent and remote emigrations of illiterate Barbarians” (Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, ch. 26), no historian of the later nineteenth century could afford to forget the accounts of Jórmunrekkur and Íormenric, and their demonstration that Greek and Latin civilisations were not the only ones that mattered. Perhaps the true contribution of the new linguistic visions of the past, however, was one more imponderable. Much as one may disagree with the conclusions of Hermann Schneider, or Jacob Grimm, or indeed William Morris with his strings of strange words like “motestead” or “doomring” or “sackless” or “wainburg”, one is obliged to admit that all

20 There are some remarks on the subject in E.G. Stanley, op.cit., pp.18–21, 24, 26, et passim; and in Andreas Haarder, Beowulf: the Appeal of a Poem (Copenhagen, 1975), pp.251–3.
of them were men who could “render a reason”; who gave not only their beliefs but also the evidence on which those beliefs were based. Disagreement was anticipated, if not courted. In this at least the philologists and their followers tried to look outwards at the past, and not merely to project the present backwards. Their art contained strong elements of imagination, or fantasy; but its enthusiasms were at least kindled by a rigorous and academic discipline.

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