The Elusive Nature of Germanic Heroic Poetry

A Rhizomatic Model

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Among so many fascinating contributions coming from historians, the present paper may appear as an outlier, more to do with literature and philology than with history. And yet, to my mind, looking at the protean embodiments of the group of narratives usually grouped under the label 'Germanic heroic poetry' is as much a historical scholarly endeavour as, say, looking at the political circumstances surrounding Gregory of Tours as a Frankish bishop. Not only do both types of study need to look at texts that are 'literary' (even if in different ways), but the adjective 'historical' itself can mean much more than a history of traceable events. Subsequently, I approach Germanic heroic poetry with an eye to the kind of history-writing envisaged by the representatives of the French *Annales* School of historiography. Out of the many forms in which they changed the way historians look at their discipline, both with regards to the object of inquiry and methodologies, I am most interested in their explorations into the apparently immaterial modes of history, the slow-changing conceptions of people such as *mentalités*, worldviews, and implicit conceptualisations. History should not be preoccupied only with the study of events, or even with slowly evolving social and political phenomena, but also with mental structures which sometimes change very little over time (i.e. *longue durée* history), and which, moreover, are invisible to the very people who share them and who lead their private and collective lives according to them.[1] For 'events are ordered by culture', and thus the immaterial and unquantifiable factors such as the imagination (*l'imaginaire*) or collective representations/mentalities are just as important in the making of history as the political and social aspects of existence.[2] Of course, these two modes of history-writing are always inextricably linked, especially in the Middle Ages, their separation being only a scholarly distinction meant to facilitate our understanding. Mentalities are

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[1] Peter Burke, *The French Historical Revolution: The Annales School, 1929-89* (Oxford: Polity Press, 1990), pp. 2-5 ff.
[2] Burke, *Annales*, pp. 111-16 et passim (p. 105); for the notion of *imaginaire*, see Jacques le Goff, *The Medieval Imagination*, trans. by Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), pp. 1-13.

instantiated in social phenomena and the political is sometimes the territory for the manifestation of an essentially symbolic and 'imaginary' order of things. In the present case, I am interested in what the evolution and various incarnations of a specific 'Germanic heroic' narrative – that of Siegfried and the dragon – can tell us about the mentalities and cultural codes of different textual communities to which, at different times and in different locations, it became relevant.[3]

The approach used here is historical more than philological, since the present study looks at the factors that shaped these texts in different ways, considering them to be signs of otherwise invisible historical phenomena taking place behind the physical existence of the texts. This has been done before by previous scholars trying first to extract the 'real' historical events from heroic legendary epics, and later, more sophisticatedly, to associate these texts with certain political or historiographic agendas conceivable during the time of their (re)writing.[4] While the former approach has long been deemed too contentious to be useful, although its repercussions are strong to this day,[5] the second is quite active and has produced helpful (though not always consensual) results. My own approach, although relying on much work of the latter type, is on the one hand less ambitious – I do not presume to identify such *Realpolitik* patterns in literary works. On the other hand, it aspires – in a fitting *Annales*-inspired manner – at providing a global model (the rhizome) that would help us better conceptualise the very idea of 'Germanic heroic poetry', as well as account for some of the idiosyncrasies of this *longue-durée* cultural phenomenon.

'Rhizome' is the title of a short pamphlet by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, published in 1976 – with minor modifications; it was to become the first chapter of *Mille plateaux*, the second volume of *Capitalisme et schizophrénie*. Deleuze and Guattari's theorization of the rhizome describes the processes we have been discussing with uncanny accuracy. In botany, a rhizome is an

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[3] For 'textual communities', see Brian Stock, *The Implications of Literacy: Written Language and Models of Interpretation in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), pp. 1-10 and 30-87.

[4] See Tom Shippey and Andreas Haarder, eds, *Beowulf: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge, 1998) about the 'historical' use of Beowulf in the nineteenth century.

[5] For the 'historical-truth-in-legend' approach, see rather recently Annelise Talbot, 'Sigemund the Dragon-Slayer', *Folklore*, 94 (1983), 153-62; Roswitha Wisniewski, 'Die Urform der Siegfriedsage im Beowulf?', in *Uf der mâze pfat: Festschrift für Werner Hoffman*, ed. by Waltraut Fritsch-Rössler (Göppingen: Kümmerle, 1991), pp. 55-69. A few examples among many for the other approach: Robert L. Kelogg, 'The Context for Epic in Later Anglo-Saxon England', in *Heroic Poetry in the Anglo-Saxon Period: Studies in Honor of Jess B. Bessinger, Jr.*, ed. by Helen Damico and John Leyerle, Studies in Medieval Culture, 32 (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1993), pp. 139-56; Heinz Thomas, 'Dichtung und Politik um 1200: Das Nibelungenlied', in *Pöchlarner Heldenliedgespräch: Das Nibelungenlied und der mittlere Donauraum*, ed. by Klaus Zatloukal, Philologica Germanica, 12 (Wien: Fassbaender, 1990), pp. 103-129; Michael Matto, 'A War of Containment: The Heroic Image in The Battle of Maldon', *Studia Neophilologica*, 74 (2002), 60-75.

underground root system, a dynamic, open, decentralized network that branches out to all sides unpredictably and horizontally.[6] A view of the whole is therefore impossible. A rhizome can take the most diverse forms: from splitting and spreading in all directions on the surface to the form of bulbs and tubers. The most important characteristic of a rhizome is that it has *multiple entryways*. From whichever side one enters, as soon as one is in, one is connected. The existence of multiple entryways automatically implies *multiplicity*. Within the multiplicity, there is no clear hierarchy, structure, or order. This suggests that each point of a rhizome can be connected with any other point in the rhizome (the principle of *connection*), and at whatever point a rhizome is ruptured or destroyed, it will always grow further according to different lines or connections (the principle of *asignifying rupture*). Deleuze and Guattari compare the rhizome with a map (the principle of *cartography*) and not with a blueprint or a tracing, since the rhizome is open, receptive to include changes constantly, just like a map always has multiple entryways, all of which are equally good or equally important. The only thing that changes as one chooses a different entryway is the map of the rhizome itself.[7]

If we think of the Germanic heroic tradition as a rhizome, its ramifications in all directions stand for the erratic and diversified embodiments of the oral-written tradition; its 'concretion into bulbs and tubers' represent the 'thickening' of the fluid oral material into temporarily fixed textual artefacts (but which in time become in their turn points of origin for yet other oral rhizomatic threads), or, the simultaneous presentation of different parts of the model, overtaking the texture like knots. The 'asignifying ruptures' of the heroic tradition describe the immediate juxtapositions (as though 'cutting across') of oral and textual versions (but also motifs, narrative cores and roles) out of their proper sequence.

The need for this notion will become immediately apparent as I sketch the main issues of the Siegfried narrative. But first, the main problem of talking today about 'Germanic heroic' poetry resides, I believe, in what meaning this label still carries. Generations of scholars have uncritically been perpetuating both this very phrase and the cultural baggage of nineteenth-century scholarship coming with it. The very notions of 'Germanic' and 'heroic' poetry are, of course, vague and charged terms, and rightfully questioned.[8] The former term is disputed because there is

[6] For the following, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* [*Mille plateaux*], trans. by Robert Hurley, Mark Seem and Helen R. Lane (London: Continuum, 2004 [1980]), pp. 3-23 et *passim.*

[7] Jasmina Sermijn, Patrick Devlieger and Gerrit Loots, 'The Narrative Construction of the Self: Selfhood as a Rhizomatic Story', *Qualitative Inquiry*, 14 (2008), 632-50 (p. 637).

[8] Daniela Fruscione, 'On "Germanic"', *The Heroic Age*, 14 (2010); Walter Goffart, 'Conspicuous by Absence: Heroism in the Early Frankish Era (6th-7th cent.)', in *La Funzione dell'eroe germanico: Storicità, metafora, paradigma: Atti del*

no evidence that early medieval ethnic groups speaking Germanic languages had any notion of their being somehow related in a supraethnic 'Germanic community'. The actual heroism of this tradition is questioned because the sources of the *Völkerwanderung* contain little proof for the 'heroic ethos' heroic poetry projects on this period; furthermore, they both carry the Romanticist and nationalistic baggage of nineteenth-century scholarship.[9] Although scholars still use the phrase 'Germanic heroic poetry', no one presumes to (re)define it. Rather, it is too often treated as a given, an ahistorical notion which presumably refers to something everyone agrees upon.[10] Moreover, the received Germanic heroic model has not been contested, neither has it been grounded upon clearly defined terms and temporal, spatial, nor genre limits.[11]

Spatially, 'Germanic' is usually taken to mean that all these texts are based on dramatic situations and feature characters that go back to events happening in Germanic speaking lands in the Age of the Migrations (the fall of the Burgundian kingdom, the battles between the Huns and the Goths etc., Theodoric, Attila, Walter of Aquitaine et al.). These people(s) and the literary traditions that perpetuate their memory usually belong to Germanic peoples; even if, interestingly, not the same group in both cases – Theodoric was a Goth for example, but his legend was largely told by Anglo-Saxons and Danes. Yet where do we draw the line? *Beowulf* is only peripherally preoccupied with these figures – its focus is decidedly Danish and Southern Scandinavian; *Widsith* contains all these figures but more as part of a catalogue of nations and personalities than as a meaningful heroic narrative. This brings us to the 'heroism' of these texts. One of the first attestations of the heroic genre is *Waltharius* (ninth century), and is a patently ironic text mocking the very Germanic heroic tradition it supposedly celebrates. Perhaps literature depicting feats of

Convegno internazionale di studio Roma, 6-8 maggio 1993, ed. by Teresa Pàroli (Rome: Calamo, 1995) , pp. 41-56; Albrecht Classen, 'The Bloody Battle Poem as Negative Examples: The Argument Against Blood Feud and Images of Peaceful Political Negotiations in German Heroic Poetry', *Amsterdamer Beiträge zur älteren Germanistik*, 53 (2000), 123-43.

[9] Fruscione, 'On "Germanic"'; Goffart, 'Conspicuous by Absence'.

[10] One example among many containing studies deeply rooted in the 'Germanic heroic' without ever reassessing the very phrase: *La Funzione dell'eroe germanico: Storicità, metafora, paradigma: Atti del Convegno internazionale di studio Roma, 6-8 maggio 1993*, ed. by Teresa Pàroli (Rome: Calamo, 1995). Yet, as Shippey and Haarder's *Beowulf: The Critical Heritage* eloquently proves, all Germanicist scholarship carries a heavy baggage.

[11] Theodore M. Andersson, *A Preface to the Nibelungenlied* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987), especially Part I (pp. 1-78) contains one of the most thorough surveys available of the main trends and issues in the scholarship on the Germanic heroic tradition. For recent accounts of Germanic heroic poetry which, although attempting critiques of such received notions, cannot wholly detach themselves from previous models, see Shami Ghosh, 'On the Origins of Germanic Heroic Poetry: A Case Study of the Legend of the Burgundians', *Beiträge zur Geschichte der deutschen Sprache und Literatur*, 129, 2 (2007), 220-52; Hugh Magennis, 'Germanic Legend and Old English Heroic Poetry', in *A Companion to Medieval Poetry*, ed. by Corinne Saunders (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), pp. 85-100; Rolf H. Bremmer, Jr., 'Old English Heroic Literature', in *Readings in Medieval Texts: Interpreting Old and Middle English Literature*, ed. by David F. Johnson and Elaine Treharne (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 75-90.

martial prowess was an acquired taste, coming late to the scene of early medieval literature.[12] Even later, Middle High German and Scandinavian texts are more interested in love and marriages than in heroic exploits; this is likely due to the influence of French twelfth-century romances.

Even if we conceive of Germanic heroic poetry as a genre, it is certainly a very heterogeneous one, encompassing short, action-packed texts, such as the Old Saxon *Hildebrandslied* and the Old English *The Fight at Finnsburgh*, and later, longer, dramatic and dialogue-strewn texts like some Eddic poems such as *Atlakviða*, *Atlamál*, *Sigurðarkviða* etc. The genre also contains later full-blown epics such as the Old Norse *Völsunga saga* and the Middle High German *Nibelungenlied*. But what are the boundaries of this genre? Temporally, its beginnings are still placed in unattested narratives dating back to the *Völkerwanderung* (although this has been contested by Goffart).[13] The first attested texts seem to be, again, wildly different. Which one is the better candidate: the ironic, mock epic *Waltharius*, or the tragic lay *Hildebrandslied*? Other very different texts have been lumped up with these poetic and fictional texts – chronicle entries, such as the one in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, AD 755, which depicts the presumably heroic story of Cynewulf and Cyneheard, the two feuding brothers, although the text itself is in no way 'heroic' or favourable towards Cynewulf or his men.[14] Is *Þiðreks saga* a collection of romances or of Germanic heroic poems? Germanic heroic characters and situations are still there – the modes of presentation are very different, however. This is a very brief survey of the extreme variety of modes, genres and attitudes towards the supposedly central values of this cultural phenomenon we call Germanic heroic poetry, and it is for these very reasons that I use 'tradition' instead of 'poetry'.

The question that comes naturally is whether this label has any real meaning. Though I do not presume to answer it yet, most researchers would agree that the existence of this label is, nonetheless, useful. When studying any representative of this loose category of narratives, on the one hand, there are always tantalizing connections that lead to some larger pretextual tradition out of which the texts themselves peer out like the tip of an iceberg; on the other hand, no individual text can be studied in isolation from both the rich oral tradition that must have preceded it and the various forms in which it was reworked into later literary traditions. For these

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[12] Goffart, 'Conspicuous by Absence', p. 43 ff. Walter Goffart certainly thinks so.
[13] *Ibid.*
[14] For the 'Germanic heroic' argument, see Rolf H. Bremmer, Jr., 'The Germanic Context of "Cynewulf and Cyneheard" Revisited', *Neophilologus*, 81 (1997), 445-65.

reasons, the solution lies not in abolishing the category of Germanic heroic tradition, but in reframing it in terms that would account for both its protean variety and its inextricable interconnectedness. The rhizome, as briefly mentioned above, is a conceptual model that allows unity in ramification (as shall be discussed further down), which would thus provide a proper grounding for our redefinition of 'Germanic heroic tradition' while accounting for both its bewildering ramification and its apparent unity. In this model, the tradition need not have been homogenous and its borders need not be sharply defined – instead, it is connected to other rhizomes (historiography, oral memory, folk tale) with which it shares certain threads of narrative. The unity of the Germanic heroic narrative rhizome is given exactly by these two factors: its enduring narrative cores and its rhizomatic nature.

The attempts to conceptualize Germanic heroic poetry as a whole is inseparable from understanding the way in which the texts that have been preserved relate to the rich, and much more extensive, array of pretextual narratives they must have been based on. In other words, the problem of whether the label describes anything meaningful depends on how we understand the relationship between the few manuscripts we have and the multiplicity of oral traditions that preceded them. In this context, it is understandable why some scholars refuse to consider anything apart from the written texts in their sole textuality (or at most in their subsequent uses) – attempting to discern the previous stages of the texts that we have is futile.[15] This approach, which has been termed 'New Philology' (although its tenets have not been new since the 1960s), which also looks outside the written text to find analogues, sources, unrecorded prior versions etc.[16] Practitioners of New Philology hold that literary works do not exist independently of their material embodiments, and that their physical form is an integral part of its meaning; hence, the manuscript is the only worthy subject of study, and not any presumable pretextual history. But this allows for a very restricted view of the text, especially in the case of heroic verse, which has multiple versions and a very complicated network of connections between different variants

[15] The most recent example (also a very good theoretical starting-point), see Matthew Driscoll, 'The Words on the Page: Thoughts on Philology, Old and New', in *Creating the Medieval Saga: Versions, Variability, and Editorial Interpretations of Old Norse Saga Literature*, ed. by Judy Quinn and Emily Lethbridge (Odense: Syddansk Universitetsforlag, 2010), pp. 85-102.

[16] For the theoretical underpinnings of the dispute between Old and New Philology, see also Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, 'A Philological Invention of Modernism: Menéndez Pidal, García Lorca, and the Harlem Renaissance', in *The Future of the Middle Ages: Medieval Literature in the 1990s*, ed. by William D. Paden (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 1994), pp. 32-49. For New Philology in Medieval Studies, see the special issue 'The New Philology' of *Speculum*, 65 (1990), 1-108 and *Towards a Synthesis?: Essays on the New Philology*, ed. by Keith Busby (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1993).

across genres and cultural milieus. Even if we choose to limit our perspective to what is known without any doubt, namely the written poems as they were fixed at a discernible time, and to give them an interpretation of their medieval reception, it is still very important whether the poem, in a given historical context, is being perceived as being brand new or age-old.[17] Of course, there is no need to conceive the two approaches in dichotomic terms – both are valid entry-points to the study of Germanic heroic poetry. In less trenchant terms, New Philology prefers to study the end product rather than the process, while Old Philology considers the manuscripts to be textual carriers of previous traditions, the aim of the textual study being to describe the work lying behind the actual manuscripts.[18] Still, the sceptical positions have been made repeatedly in the past decade in Old Norse studies, and the implications for Germanic heroic poetry have not been thoroughly investigated.

Certainly, the debate is much more far-reaching than can be summarized here, but this extremely sceptical position seems untenable to a number of scholars who have argued very convincingly that we can, with prudence, know things about the pretextual roots of these texts.[19] As shall become apparent, what we *can* now say is most often not how a certain text might have looked before it was written down, when it still belonged to the oral literary tradition, but what forces acted upon an oral story (not a fixed text, but a narrative core which could come in different states of aggregation) so that it ended up in the textual form we know so well; in other words, how that narrative core was adopted from one cultural milieu to another (geographically or socially), how it was adapted to the poetics and means of expression particular to that cultural milieu and it became associated with different narrative cores which underwent the same processes (though in different ways). Still, for this we need an all-encompassing model that would be flexible enough (also easily adaptable to different objects of study and simple to grasp) to work when all idiosyncrasies are taken into account.

Yet such a model is avoided by scholars. This is, of course, understandable not only due to a healthy postmodern resistance to Grand Narratives, but also if we look closer at the previous history of the field. Such efforts of systematizing the whole of Germanic heroic poetry have been

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[17] Bjarne Fidjestøl, *The Dating of Eddic Poetry: A Historical Survey and Methodological Investigation*, Bibliotheca Arnamagnæana 40, ed. by Odd Einar Haugen (Copenhagen: Reitzel, 1999), p. 194.

[18] Ingvil Brügger Budal, 'Visible Stratification in a Medieval Text: Traces of Multiple Redactors in a Text Extant in a Single Manuscript', in *Modes of Authorship in the Middle Ages*, ed. by Slavica Rankovic et al., Papers in Mediaeval Studies, 22 (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2012), pp. 309-24 (pp. 314 ff.).

[19] Fidjestøl, *Dating Edda*, pp. 187-203; Theodore M. Andersson, 'From Tradition to Literature in the Sagas', in *Oral Art Forms and their Passage into Writing*, ed. by Else Mundal and Jonas Wellendorf (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2008), pp. 7-17 (p. 9 ff.); Brügger Budal, 'Visible Stratification'.

made, but have long fallen out of favour. They belonged to German and Scandinavian scholars of the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century whose theories have been associated (partly by rights) with nationalistic and even *völkisch* ways of doing philology and history. Andreas Heusler's *Heldensagenmodell*, for instance, involved an evolutionary model which postulated the development of the full-blown heroic epic (*Epos*) from much earlier short lays (*Lied*), going through the intermediate form of minstrel lays ('spielmännische Zwischenphase'), by interstitial increments (the gradual addition of dramatic and descriptive details and dialogue in each of the narrative cells that compose the lay).[20] In geographical and historical terms, he posited this evolution thus: Germanic epic lay – Scandinavian dramatical form – Icelandic lyric.[21] Indeed, this model has been criticized and discarded, yet nothing new has been proposed in its stead.[22] Moreover, this type of teleological thinking still permeates scholarship. Even if Heusler et al. are left behind, the philological impulse to look for one 'text' (even when using the broadest acceptation of the term), one source, one *Ur-Siegfriedslied* that presumably lies at the root of all later versions, is still alive and well among scholars.

The great quandary of contemporary scholars approaching these texts is thus that, while they are still using the concept of 'Germanic heroic poetry' without qualification, they lack Heusler's and Neckel's solid narrative which, if flawed, at least accounted for their usage of the term.[23] This is why the small scope study is preferred, and scholars choose to focus on single Germanic heroic texts. But the problem of accounting for this category of early medieval literature is not avoided, only postponed. In this context, the growth of Germanic heroic poetry scholarship is stunted by the scholars' timidity in proposing global models, even if related fields of academic inquiry thrive. In the words of one Scandinavian scholar:

> scholarship has avoided any serious attempt to face up this problem [the difficulty of accounting for both the truthfulness and fictionality of orally-derived sagas] and sought

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[20] Theodore M. Andersson, 'Walter Haug's *Heldensagenmodell*', in *Germania: Comparative Studies in the Old Germanic Languages and Literatures*, ed. by Daniel G. Calder and T. Craig Christy (Woodbridge: D.S. Brewer, 1988), pp. 127-41; the classic reference is Andreas Heusler, *Die altgermanische Dichtung* (Potsdam: Akademische Verlagsgesellschaft Athenaion, 1941).

[21] Fidjestøl, *Dating Edda*, pp. 153-56.

[22] Walter Haug, 'Andreas Heuslers Heldensagenmodell: Prämissen, Kritik und Gegentwurf', *Zeitschrift für deutsche Literatur* 104 (1975), 273-92 is such a proposal, but, as Andersson argues, it is too indebted to Heusler to be considered a new model.

[23] Ghosh, "Burgundians'; Hugh Magennis, 'Germanic Legend and Old English Heroic Poetry', in *A Companion to Medieval Poetry*, ed. by Corinne Saunders (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), pp. 85-100.

refuge in atomistic subdisciplinary approaches […] many scholars have simply been daunted by the challenge of struggling with a tradition that was both ever-changing and ancient at the same time, of coming to terms with the idea that it was capable of taking in new material while simultaneously carrying memories from the distant past.[24]

However, such thriving scholarship, especially when focussed on orality and literacy in Scandinavian literary traditions, is based on proposing global narratives and testing their applicability to the sources. Among such bold models for orality and literacy in the early Middle Ages very recent scholars have proposed distributed authorship, Drout's model of memetic authorial agency, the oral-written continuum as a space, as verbal marketplace or as a medium.[25] Indeed, they help our understanding this specific aspect of the subject under discussion – negotiating orality and literacy in the cultural communities that produced and passed on these texts. Yet this is only one dimension of the literary phenomenon we still call 'Germanic heroic poetry' – it does not account for why the texts look as they do across different literary traditions. In other words, while memetics or distributed authorship are potentially powerful ways of explaining the specific mechanisms involved in the creation and transmission of Germanic heroic poetry, we still do not have an overarching model that would account for our continuous use of this label for a wide variety of texts and literary traditions. Again, the rhizome would provide an appropriate theoretical model which would account for this variety and would allow scholars to continue to talk meaningfully about 'Germanic heroic poetry' as a genre/literary category. Moreover, it would be a radical departure from the prevalent teleological thinking that searches (even if in sophisticated and updated ways) for one source, one Ur-text, in Heuslerian terms, for one acorn from which the mighty oak of one Germanic heroic legend sprung up. It is teleological also because it subordinates all previous versions (preserved or lost) of one narrative to the form under which it came to fruition in late but satisfyingly monolithic texts such as the *Nibelungenlied*. Still, they are the final form of a narrative only because we choose to see them thus. The realities of the sources, however, contradict this one-directional and hierarchical view of the Germanic tradition.

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[24] Gísli Sigurðsson, 'Orality Harnessed: How to Read Written Sagas from an Oral Culture', in also *Oral Art Forms and their Passage into Writing*, ed. by Else Mundal and Jonas Wellendorf (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2008), pp. 19-28 (p. 25).

[25] *Along the Oral-Written Continuum: Types of Texts, Relations and Their Implications*, ed. by Slavica Ranković, Leidulf Melve and Else Mundal, Utrecht Studies in Medieval Literacy, 20 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2010), out of which see especially Drout, 'The Medieval Author in Memetic Terms', pp. 30-51, Slavica Ranković, 'The Oral-Literate Continuum as a Space', pp. 39-72, and John Miles Foley, 'Verbal Marketplaces and the Oral-Literate Continuum', pp. 17-38; see also *Oral Art Forms and their Passage into Writing*, ed. by Else Mundal and Jonas Wellendorf (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2008) *passim.*

For the sake of illustration, I briefly present the avatars of a single narrative core: that of Siegfried as dragon-slayer. The story of Sigurðr/Siegfried, as is presented by the *Nibelungenlied* and *Völsunga saga* is a composite; even these two texts late are based on different versions of the narrative. Yet the very fact of their complicated history opens up a window onto the nature of Germanic heroic poetry. In brief, the Sigurd narrative, as was known in the thirteenth century by both German and Scandinavian traditions, is based on three narrative cores going back several centuries: an early 'Kriemhilt Lay', as reflected in the Eddic poem *Atlakviða*, became linked and intimately fused with Gunther-Attila material, in which Kriemhilt avenged her brothers. Kriemhilt was later equated with Siegfried's widow, originally a different person, and becomes his avenger (as in the Eddic *Atlamál*). Underlying this story might have been a folktale type of narrative about a Germanic embodiment, who at one point came to be known as Sigemund, of a generic Indo-European dragon slayer.[26] This would explain why the earliest attestations of the narrative, such as in *Beowulf*, and by allusions in some skaldic poems, feature Sigemund, not Siegfried.[27] The account of Siegfried's assassination and the rivalry between the two powerful women, Brynhild and Kriemhild/Guðrun might reflect the assassination of young king Sigibert in 575 due to the rivalry between Brunechildis and Fredegunda in sixth-century Francia.[28]

But even if the historical accounts themselves did not play a direct part into the dissemination of the legends, they are still far from being objective records of the facts, and thus become part of the flux of narratives in which the 'heroic poems' developed – even if they are not the precise source of the poems. The story of Brunihildis is not the only case of this type of evolution – the oft-quoted story of Rosimund and Alboin is in fact a better example of how historical events can become more and more fictionalized over a comparatively small time-scale, even in accounts belonging to aristocratic, Latinate milieus such as those of Gregory of Tours and Paul the Deacon.[29] One might assume that the joining of the Brynhild legend with the one concerning the fall of the Burgundians took place at this stage: the absorption of Burgundian into Merovingian Francia, the retention of a Germanic language in part of the Frankish realm, and the similarity of

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[26] *Völsunga saga*, ed. and introduction by R. G. Finch (London: Nelson, 1965), p. xviii.

[27] *Klaeber's Beowulf and The Fight at Finnsburg*, ed. by R.D. Fulk, R.E.Bjork and J.D. Niles, 4th edition (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008).

[28] Edward G. Fichtner, 'Sigfrid's Merovingian Origins', *Monatshefte*, 96, 3 (2004), 327-42. The primary source is *The Fourth Book of the Chronicle of Fredegar with its Continuations*, ed. and trans. by J. M. Wallace-Hadrill (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1960) IV, 41, p. 34. But see also Gregory of Tours, *History of the Franks*, trans. by Ernest Brehaut (New York: Norton, 1969) IV, 27, 28 (pp.89-91) and V, 2 (p. 106) et *passim*.

[29] Ghosh, 'Burgundians', pp. 236-39.

names between some historical Frankish figures and those of legend could be enough to suggest that the Burgundian legend lived on and was modified among the Franks.[30]

It is true that throughout elite cultural networks, hagiographical literature was the most widely demanded and popular form of narrative, especially the *passiones martyrum*, extolling Christian heroes and heroines, precisely during the supposedly heroic age of the *Völkerwanderung*, rather than the lives of Walter and Sigemund.[31] Still, Alcuin's famous complaint '*Quid Hinieldus cum Christo*?' clearly shows that, at least some, Northumbrian monks preferred to listen to heroic legends (one of whose heroes was Ingeld, mentioned oftentimes alongside Sigemund) at meal-time rather than patristic readings.[32] In any case, in the age of Charlemagne, the Franks became interested in the past, and specifically in their Germanic past.[33] 'Gothicism', the desire to forge ancestral links with the people of Ermanaric and Theodoric, suddenly became fashionable around 800.[34] It is in this cultural context that stories of Sigibert and Brunechildis might have risen to prominence. Still, the narrative of courtly intrigue could have appealed to the cultured elite even earlier, but now, with the rise of vernacular heroic traditions, someone saw the potential these stories had together, as we have seen earlier, considering the similar names and situations, and the Burgundian-Frankish connection.

In this context, the story centering on Sigemund as the original dragon-slayer must be confined to an earlier folktale-like narrative, closer to the universally-spread stories of dragon-slayers common to all Indo-European cultures and literary traditions since the earliest times.[35] According to this scenario, the Sigemund story has more affinities with folk-tale (though not necessarily being one) and Indo-European mythology, and is the more archaic layer. This story would have been general knowledge, shared by all social strata – a narrative centred on an archetypal dragon-slayer and renowned hero (as seen in *Beowulf* and the earliest Old Norse skaldic references). To this basic story two more recent and more specific narratives were added: that of Sigurd and Brynhild and that of the fall of the Burgundians. The former, at least at the time of its emergence, would have been a narrative originally tasted by an aristocratic milieu uninterested in heroic songs, as usually

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[30] Ghosh, 'Burgundians', p. 235.

[31] Goffart, 'Conspicuous by Absence', p. 54.

[32] Patrick Wormald, 'Bede, Beowulf and the Conversion of the Anglo-Saxon Aristocracy', *British Archaeological Reports*, 46 (1978), 32-95.

[33] Ghosh, 'Burgundians', p. 235.

[34] Roberta Frank, 'Germanic Legend in Old English Literature', in *The Cambridge Companion to Old English Literature*, ed. by Malcolm Godden and Michael Lapidge (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 88-106 (p. 93).

[35] The foremost study in comparative mythology and linguistics on the dragon-slayer narratives throughout the Indo-European world is Calvert Watkins, *How to Kill a Dragon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

assumed, but rather in quasi-historic morality stories of former good and evil kings and queens. The latter would have been a narrative drawing, likewise, on historical events, though worked into a narrative of betrayal and composure in the face of adversity whose original social appeal is uncertain. Two equally plausible scenarios could have been at work: a Burgundian aristocracy with a residual autonomy in Francia might have handed on the account of their demise as a reminder of ethnic belonging, but it could equally have been adopted from vernacular oral poems by an aristocracy suddenly interested in the heroic past in the ninth century. At some point later on it became amalgamated with the story of Sigurd and Brynhild with both narratives being set adjacent to one another, at least in terms of legendary geography and history, which helped in their being considered to be connected. The story of Sigmund might have been connected to this Franco-Burgundian story with the rise to fame of Sigurd as a character in order to give a background story to the emerging protagonist of the cycle. At this point, the dragon-slayer himself becomes Sigurd, fitting better with his new-found profile. Thus Sigmund passed into narrative obscurity, as one figure from the long Völsung lineage.

In this single strand of narrative one can see *in nuce* the characteristics of German heroic poetry, in general, with its seemingly chaotic changes of character names, identities, attribution of scenes and actions, variations of modes of exposition, attitudes towards heroism, death, sexuality etc. Narrative layers go up and down again in terms of social status, intertwine and separate and intertwine again. When looking into the earliest hypothetical evolutions of these 'texts' (understood in the widest possible sense), one is forced to talk in the same breath about Fredegar and Gregory of Tours, folktales, Indo-European mythology, Old Norse sagas, French romances, the Heroic Age of the Germanic tribes. Everything is interconnected. There are no easily discernible genealogies. We can draw up manuscript stemmas for the preserved texts themselves, but they are but a small part of the greater Germanic heroic tradition.

There was a continual interchange in early medieval Europe between written and oral modes of transmission, between the historical scholarship that recorded events like the presence of Burgundian hostages among the Huns and the tall tales that told of their adventures.[36] Different levels of society practiced different forms of *memoria* and identity formation, yet the Latinate and

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[36] Roberta Frank, 'Germanic Legend in Old English Literature', in *The Cambridge Companion to Old English Literature*, ed. by Malcolm Godden and Michael Lapidge (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 88-106 (p. 97).

vernacular speaking sections of society may have participated in the same discourse of oral tradition for different reasons. For both, the tradition of heroic legends, in their performance, probably functioned as a cultural/historical symbol of the past.[37] Even if Christian writers express antipathy towards heroic poetry, it is known to have been read in some monasteries and was also copied into manuscripts, thus demonstrating that not all those in religious life were necessarily so hostile to the genre.[38] In Old English and Old Saxon biblical poems and saints' lives there was an attempt to assimilate Germanic-heroic and Christian traditions, with biblical figures and saints being presented in heroic terms and living in a version of the heroic world.[39]

The potential prototypes of later heroic verse need not have been formal poems; they may just have been stories passed on informally, not necessarily in the context of any kind of performance or ceremonial setting.[40] Indeed, they need not have been heroic in any way whatsoever. Some of these prototypes might even have belonged to the highest echelon of Latinate literate culture. Conceivably, one such prototype could have been the account of Sigibert and Brunhilda in the historical works of Gregory of Tours and Fredegar, which has been described as a political morality tale consisting of cautionary narratives embedded in the historiographical discourse about evil kings and queens who eventually are divinely punished and good, pious monarchs and aristocrats whose stories usually end well.[41] The beginnings of the passing into legend of near-contemporary events can be seen in the case of the story of Alboin and Rosamund, recorded in dry historiographical prose within a few decades of his death, while two centuries later, Paul the Deacon recounts the same story, but with substantial embellishments and unhistorical additions

Much of the oral material was transmitted in fragmented and episodic form – the narrative was often passed down not in neatly composed sagas but in random bits and pieces. The oral transmissions were not necessarily fixed but were multifarious and could be recollected and recorded in various combinations.[42] There was wide variation between different versions of the same story, even those told by the same people; each teller made individual choices on styles of presentation as well as the selection of particular incidents. These decisions could have been almost infinitely variable. This is why no simple correspondence can be drawn between any

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[37] Ghosh, 'Burgundians', pp. 239 and 251.
[38] Goffart, 'Conspicuous by Absence'.
[39] Magennis, *Germanic Legend*, p. 96.
[40] Ghosh, 'Burgundians', p. 247
[41] Goffart, *The Narrators of Barbarian History (ad 550-800): Jordanes, Gregory of Tours, Bede, and Paul the Deacon* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), pp. 168-74.
[42] Andersson, 'Tradition in Sagas', p. 12.

particular written heroic poem and a particular oral story.[43] With each movement of the legend, the new groups adopting and adapting it might have brought their own historical traditions that melded and lost their immediate historical value as the group identities overlapped.[44] Therefore, political use of heroic verse occurred naturally.

As late as the fourteenth century, Scandinavian ballads were part of these fluctuations of the form of the narrative too.[45] The formulas seem to have been a stable element in the tradition, but ballad stories themselves may constantly have changed. If a ballad was composed to depict a certain historical event, this depiction would tend to become more general and less specific, as the ballad was handed down from generation to generation. A political conflict would, for instance, develop into a love story, or a story of revenge. Usually, the only historical things about so-called historical ballads are the names of the protagonists. This is strikingly similar to the way in which the pretextual versions of the narratives which coalesced into the Sigurd legend evolved. Solberg makes the distinction between the ballad's creative period, which may have been very short, and the much longer period of tradition.[46] During the former, the narrative is subject to cross-pollination with other very different types of narratives and to great variation, whereas during the latter, the narrative is more or less fixed in form/ossified, and handed down by way of retellers – though of course no reteller ever narrates the exact same account twice – this would account for variations over time, though structurally the narrative may be essentially preserved. In some cases, of course, the creative period never ended, especially in oral traditions, while at other times, it may have been fossilized into a written variant which in its turn was reappropriated by other oral traditions, which led to a new creative period. The Sigurd legend itself seems to be such a case, whereby a written version of the *Nibelungenlied* (or one of its textual sources) later became the root for a series of oral Scandinavian ballads.

How can this variation and interconnectedness be conceptualised? A recent metaphor used to convey such flexibility is 'det muntliga havet' (the open sea of orality) – the phrase suggests that

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[43] Andersson, 'Tradition in Sagas', pp. 13-15.
[44] Ghosh, 'Burgundians', p. 250
[45] Olav Solberg, 'The Scandinavian Medieval Ballad: From Oral Tradition to Written Texts and Back Again', in *Oral Art Forms and their Passage into Writing*, ed. by Else Mundal and Jonas Wellendorf (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2008), pp. 121-33 (p. 131).
[46] Solberg, *Scandinavian Ballad*, p. 131.

there were no fixed traditions, only an ebb and flow of open-ended stories.[47] Thus, there would have been no identifiable *Egils saga* etc., no hypothetical *Snorra saga goða*, only a variety of stories about all these characters.[48] Yet fluidity is a not so accurate conceptualisation when we think about the many written texts and also other fairly fixed oral 'texts' that are part of the Germanic heroic tradition. This metaphor does not account for the materiality of all these narrative strands, whether written or oral, nor for the evolution of narrative cores over time. If a literary tradition is fluid, anything goes, there are no possible reference points. Another model is that of states of aggregation. Beyond the fixed texts, the poems 'probably had as non-fixed state of aggregation'.[49] The philologist's object of study is not only the extant texts, but also the texts 'in their more vaporous state of aggregation', namely the oral texts which are taken to be represented by the extant texts.[50] This is a much better metaphor, although it still does not account for the interconnectedness of the reified objects that are written and oral texts.

A more useful way to theorize this co-existence of the systematic and the asystematic in one and the same cultural phenomenon/environment of German heroic tradition is thinking of it as a network. Although in this context it need not be made up of human agents, but of texts.[51] Alternatively, the networks of human agents that shaped the Siegfried legend throughout time and geographical space can be a legitimate starting point to understand its evolution. But texts can also be seen as being in relationship to one another, relationships that are much more complex than the usual 'A derives from B', which can usually be established in the case of a manuscript tradition. Consequently, the actual relationships between texts would be very hard to model – this is no mere stemma. Also, modelling an actual network for the whole corpus of existent Germanic heroic texts, using the broadest understanding of the terms, will always be beyond our reach for the simple reason that most of it is now lost. Thus, building an actual graph for the Germanic heroic tradition would have to solve the double obstacle of the existence of a small number of knots but also that of the nature of the edges between the knots; that is, what do these relations between texts actually stand for – derivation, influence, analogues etc.? For these reasons, in the case of the Germanic heroic tradition, a special type of network is needed, one which will hopefully stimulate thinking about this phenomenon in different terms

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[47]Tommy Danielsson, *Sagorna om Norges kungar: Från Magnús góði till Magnús Erlingsson* (Hedemora: Gidlunds Förlag, 2002), pp. 385-95. Cf. Gísli Sigurðsson, 'Orality Harnessed: How to Read Written Sagas from an Oral Culture', pp. 19-28 (p. 26).
[48] Andersson, 'Tradition in Sagas', p. 12.
[49] Fidjestøl, *Dating Edda*, p. 188.
[50] Fidjestøl, *Dating Edda*, p. 196.
[51] I use a very loose definition of the word text.

even if will not explain all the specific cases of relationships between 'texts'. Its test is not in isolating one scenario but in allowing for multiple mutually occurring evolutions. For this to happen, these networks would have to be conceptualized as rhizomes.

The very concept of 'Germanic heroic tradition' comes with blurred boundaries of genre, of time, of space; intractable dichotomies, whether oral/literate, vernacular/Latin, factual history/legendary fiction, and a protean variety of forms from the mock-heroic to the courtly romance, from the dramatic lay to the full-blown epic, not to forget the many visual representations of the story spread from Yorkshire cross-shafts to Old Norse rune stones.[52] How can one negotiate these inherent problems without a unifying theory? The rhizome answers these problems by abolishing boundaries and collapsing polarities. Instead, the Germanic heroic rhizome has connections outside its immediate centre which are at the same time parts of itself and of other rhizomes. The anecdotes of Gregory of Tours and Paul the Deacon, partakers of another rhizome one could label 'early medieval historiography', are not part of this tradition, but are still in connection with strands of this rhizome, since these narratives were at one point part of the network of stories told about contemporary historical events. In the words of Tim Ingold, an anthropologist who applied the rhizome to animist beliefs:

> [T]here is no inside or outside, and no boundary separating the two domains. Rather there is a trail of movement or growth. Every such trail traces a relation. But the relation is not between one thing and another – between the organism "here" and the environment "there." It is rather a trail along which life is lived.[53]

Or, in our case, it is a trail along which stories are told. Germanic heroic tradition can thus be defined as an interconnected set of narratives held together precisely by their interconnectedness which, however, invites a sense of endless variation. If Germanicity and heroism are not the defining essence of the Germanic heroic tradition (as I have argued), what is common to all these stories is their very being related in a discrete sense: characters are constructed and sink back into oblivion and then reemerge again; the only unchanging thing is the narrative.

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[52] For a survey of visual representations of the Siegfried narrative, see Sue Margeson, 'The Völsung Legend in Medieval Art', in *Medieval iconography and narrative: A Symposium*, ed. by Flemming G. Andersen (Odense: Odense University Press, 1980), pp. 183-211.
[53] Tim Ingold, 'Rethinking the Animate, Re-Animating Thought', *Ethnos*, 71 (2006), 9-20 (p. 15).

Thus, Deleuze and Guattari's rhizome provides a useful theorization for the evolutions and forms of Germanic heroic poetry for which scholars have struggled to find a name, let alone an aesthetic framework. Heusler's model, attempting to order only the texts that have been preserved into a meaningful model, saw stages of evolution and arborescent growth – in a rhizomatic model, these texts trace only one possible route through the rhizome – hundreds of other routes are possible and conceivably existed and can yet exist, even if not in writing. At every stage of growth, corresponding to a tuber or bud in the rhizome, the received model considers exactly one preceding stage and one following it, whereas in reality there is no such neat evolutionary model. Instead, there are many antecedents, many descending threads and also many parallel tubers in connection to the previous mentioned one.

In this context, the previously discussed tension between the two contradictory forces acting in any oral tradition – mutability and permanence – is a problem only when scholars expect oral traditions to conform to evolutionary models. One can trace the descent of a theme, motif or episode in a sequence of texts and conclude that one text is the antecedent or the parallel of another, but seeing this sequence rhizomatically allows one to conceive the same sequence as a nexus of threads which need not be essentially related, but which wend their way across the rhizome, following their course in separate directions even if they momentarily unite into a tuber. In this context, the fact that the Germanic heroic tradition encompasses very different forms of manifestation, including visual representations, is not a cause of theoretical concern and thus does not require to be dismantled as a global phenomenon. No text is an island, and the rhizome unites all these islands without the need for positing precise stemmatic trees of pretextual versions that always beg the question of their actual relationship. In other words, a rhizomatic Germanic heroic tradition would allow the scholar to avoid the two extremes of new-philological scepticism that nullifies pretextual traditions and that of previous nineteenth-century style scholarship which applied textual criticism to an essentially oral and fluid network of texts.

In the rhizome there is no tension between permanence and mutability: it is infinitely mutable by its very nature, but it is also permanent because all the mutations are not ontologically different things, but different embodiments of the same substance. In the case at hand, it is not the narrative itself, not to mention any text, that is permanent, or in any way a true image of facts preserved from the times of *Sigibert et Brunihildis* up to the *Nibelungenlied*, but the narrative dramatic situation. The names and motivations might have changed, but not a certain narrative shape. This reminds one the repeated claims of oral poets, be they South Slavic *guslars*, or Old Norse *skalds*,

that they never invent, but simply pass down or reproduce the narrative as it had been heard from another poet/instance of oral authority; they admit that they do change details, but never 'the meaning'.[54] Perhaps they should be taken more seriously, especially in this model of tradition. For, as Ruth Finnegan argues, the oral-formulaic is certainly not the only mode of composition, even in oral traditional cultures.[55] Again, this does not preclude varied degrees of mutability – after all, the extent to which poets, oral or literate, allow themselves to be original is a complex interplay between various cultural traditions and the relative independence of composition therein, on the one hand, and the personal choices of the poet, on the other. They cannot, and in this model, need not, be all traced, categorized and stemmatized. When we think about a rhizomatic Germanic heroic tradition we can speak meaningfully about both pretextual variants and fixed manuscripts, since they are all part of the same loose network of texts.

For instance, reconstructing the earliest steps of the courtly Sigurd narrative core need not contentiously reconstruct a hypothetical 'lay' or a series of progressively formal or consistent lays, but rather a network of similar, although increasingly fictional (with the passing of time) anecdotes about the assassination and the strife between the two powerful women, circulated both in aristocratic circles and amongst the lower classes. Gregory of Tours incorporated some of them into his writings, modelling them in admonitory anecdotes, Paul the Deacon relished in retelling such narratives, embellishing them (as the Rosamund and Alboin episode suggests), while some anonymous oral retellers could have modelled the anecdotes on pre-existing folktale-type of narratives, which, given time and world enough, would have evolved into songs (which need not have been formal 'heroic lays') telling of the treachery of the young king and of the two rival queens. All these narratives could have been contemporary and even mutually influential as connected tubers of the rhizome, though not necessarily evolving from one another. Later on, some of the latter stories, loosely based on the historical Sigibert and Brunechildis and modelled on folk-tale narratives, could have been adopted again into elite literary traditions, being transformed into heroic or even conceivably mock heroic narratives such *Waltharius*. Alternatively, the two traditions may very well have coexisted in different textual communities, or might have developed very far apart in time and/or space; the initial historical-core narrative was

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[54] Minna Skafte Jensen, 'The Oral-Formulaic Theory Revisited', in *Oral Art Forms and their Passage into Writing*, ed. by Else Mundal and Jonas Wellendorf (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2008), pp. 44–52 (p. 50); Ruth Finnegan, *Oral Poetry: Its Nature, Significance and Social Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), pp. 139–53.
[55] Finnegan, *Oral Poetry*, p. 73 ff.

transformed so radically according to a dragon-slayer type of folk-tale (Sigemund) that it replaced the name of the original hero, becoming an early version of the Sigurd-narrative. This is only one conceivable scenario for how all the pretextual threads go together and influence each other. The beauty of the rhizome is that a hundred other scenarios are equally possible – and certainly many of them must have took place in particular historical circumstances – without there being the need for arguing for one against another. For these reasons the rhizome is a feasible and useful model of conceptualizing Germanic heroic poetry.

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