

VI BÅR ALLA SAMMA SIGILL.  
THE RELEVANCE OF GERMANIC AND SCANDINAVIAN ANTIQUITY IN A  
SOUTH AFRICAN CONTEXT

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Dulce et decorum est pro scientia mori - It is sweet and honourable to die for science. This comforting variant of a rather well-known classical quotation does not refer to the execution of a lecturer after an exceptionally "fruitful" discussion of his paper. That would not have been the style of the 19th century to which we owe so many valuable thoughts including this one. A colleague and I stumbled on it in 1987 in a church in Sydney; it is a funeral inscription for an anthropologist killed by aborigines. I had just read a paper on the death of the hero in Germanic antiquity, and I was struck by the element of genuine sincerity in the inscription, in spite of its oddity for some latter-day 20th century scholars. The Germanic (mostly Scandinavian) heroes, although mortally wounded, usually take the trouble to compose lengthy extempore verses about their exploits, which the bystanders commit to memory or to runic tablets. This is the view of the 13th-14th century Icelandic prose stories at least, and it did look very strange to many scholars. The more one learns about oral tradition, however, the less strange such a convention would seem. Nora Chadwick has an African example in vol. 3 of "Growth of Literature". I quote:

An interesting illustration of heroic life of the less advanced type is given by Mr. F.R. Paver in the Times of 20 August 1938, in an account of an interview with a very old warrior of the Bechuana. This man related inter alia how a wounded enemy had once begged him to kill him, but first to allow him to sing his dithako, or "praise-song", which, he adds, "every Bechuana of consequence had ready for great occasions."

This piece of information seems to imply that the old Tswana's adversary carried in his spiritual baggage something like a versified overview of his previous life for possible use before his death. The purpose of such a preparation, then, would be a hope that the person or persons listening to such a poem would remember and retell it to his people or relatives. The Siberian (Kirghiz) verse epic Manas even states that a hero cannot die before he has uttered "words of wisdom", which therefore of course must never be interrupted.

Allow me then in the shadow of so many heroes to present a few ideas on Germanic antiquity and its relevance or otherwise in a South African context.

Apollinaris Sidonius, a 5th century Romano-Gaulish nobleman (430-483), writes, in a versified letter to a certain Catullinus:  
"I am still in good health, but it is really too much that you expect serene love poetry from me in my situation - me, having to share my table with those long-haired people. I am having to listen to Germanic sounds, and am obliged to seriously praise the songs of the Burgundian glutton who smears his head with rancid butter. You may consider yourself fortunate,

your eyes and ears and especially your nose. You do not already early in the morning have to endure ten portions of garlic and the cursed onion."

We can in this case safely do without the finer aspects of German literary criticism (the "lyrical ego", das lyrische Ich) and assume that the noble Roman did not have a high opinion of those Teutons as represented by their Burgundian subspecies. Their long hair could not well have reminded him of the German "langhaarige Gesellen" (long-haired fellows), as certain politicians then called the products of the 1968 student revolution and left-wingers in general. But he certainly did not like it. Nor did he think much of the Teutonic eating habits, especially their heroic portions. This is perhaps understandable if he had to provide them. But then their language and their singing! Our educated Roman knew very well that Germanic singing sounded like the howling of wild beasts. After all this had been established by earlier authorities. Still he felt obliged to praise it. The wise scholar had no wish to fall into disfavour with his unwelcome guests; he sensed that history was on their side. What a heroic disregard for one's sense of smell, though.

This attitude of basic contempt for the Barbarians thus had persisted since the first encounter between Romans and Teutons more than 500 years ago. In the meantime, Germanic tribesmen had been Roman citizens for more than 200 years and had occupied the highest ranks in the civilian and military hierarchies. Foreign behaviour, foreign language, foreign customs have always encountered dislike and prejudice. This could persist for quite a long time, and even coexist with integration. Such encounters sometimes also resulted in the adoption of certain exotic traits which one could well label with the modern expression "ethnic". One thinks of the blonde wigs, made from genuine Germanic hair, so loved by the Roman ladies when the Teutons were still being vanquished at a safe distance and kept in their homelands. One thinks of the skull deformation which the Germanic Alamans took over from the short-lived Hunnic ruling class. Generally speaking, between the extremes of enthusiastic acceptance and emphatic rejection of foreign cultures and their corporeal representatives, there is a multitude of attitudes depending e.g. on the length of contact and the general historical situation. We often find that the end result is indeed integration, particularly if there is intermarriage between the different groups. This was the case in the late Roman empire, in the Merovingian and Franconian kingdoms, and also with the Vikings where we can speak of mixed Scandinavian-Celtic and Scandinavian-English societies in Scotland and North England (mixed marriage in runic inscription from the Isle of Man; Scandinavian loan words in English: to take, husband, etc).

History thus shows both the possibility of successful integration and the stubbornness of rejection and prejudice, sometimes at the same time. Our late Roman acquaintance with his refined nose had a contemporary by the name of Syagrius. He was a scholar who had done research on the rules of Germanic verse! The Germans knew this and, so our source tells us, did not dare to recite their poems in his presence because they feared he might discover a violation of metric rules. Apart from its considerable importance for the history of Germanic poetry, this passage demonstrates another possible attitude toward the alien and unknown, namely a patient endeavour for understanding. It should be evident that all cultures are meaningful and functional in their own context and thus equally suited to

solve their specific problems within the milieu in which they have developed. When two different cultures coexist in the same milieu without interference from e.g. the state, the result will eventually be a form of integration. Syagrius could be considered an early model of a responsible scholar in an historical time of transition. We do not know whether he still regarded Roman civilisation as generally superior to Germanic culture. In an historical situation like the present one in South Africa, neither the specialist in African anthropology nor the one in early European history, can naively take for granted a superiority of European civilisation or a primitivity of African cultures. On the contrary, these views, still popular here and there, must be submitted to the test of scholarly investigation. This has been done in quite a number of cases. We do have excellent specialist research and good handbooks on Germanic culture. This literature has been able to distance itself successfully from the politically inspired enthusiasm (one might coin the term "Germanomania") of Nazi times, and to topple the myth of Germanic superiority on the basis of solid research. We naturally also have good handbooks and on-going research in South African black cultures (Junod, Krige, Mönnig); Iron Age archaeological projects). Research in Germanic antiquity still has to cope with the burden of Nazi distortions. On a probably lesser scale, South African research is a bit disadvantaged by the preconceptions and omissions of earlier missionaries, some of whom were convinced of the superiority of European civilisation which they could not separate from its Christian values. The 19th century Prussian Missionsdirektor in the Transvaal thus passes over "obscene dances" for the sake of the sensitive reader in just the same way as some pious medieval Icelandic authors do when confronted with such material.

Such shortcomings left aside, let us repeat that there is good research available or going on. There is, however, no comparative investigation of prehistoric European and archaic African cultures. This is indeed quite understandable. Comparisons can be very problematic. They can lead to controversial general theories and even to value judgments. They require a sound knowledge of all the societies involved. It is therefore with some trepidation that I am aware of my responsibility, in an African context, as a Germanist scholar with a training and interests in prehistory, oral tradition, and history of religions. However some things are quite obvious. We are part of a development of coexisting cultures, European (or better: Western) civilisation (although possibly in its final stage) and Black cultures drawn into its orbit for historical reasons and (up to now at least) for want of a better alternative. We are also, I think, in full view of the serious problems that industrialised Western societies are facing world-wide. Certainly it is time for serious stock-taking of the fundamental values of different cultures. They are what has been bequeathed to us as a tool for survival in a meaningful way. Now it is a fact that the members of the various South African "groups" do not by far know enough about each other. Without doubt, research in general has the task to replace ignorance and incomprehension by knowledge and understanding. Such research in our case could then form the basis of one or more popular books and university courses to promote knowledge and refute prejudices regarding "white" and "black" culture, traditions and history, as e.g. a certain European arrogance (based on European achievements in philosophy, religion, or industry) or perhaps also an African inferiority complex which could be due to a certain type of education and which might be compensated either by

excessive Westernisation or by stressing the incontestable values of an African heritage.

My project of one or several books for a general readership, presenting a comparative/contrastive overview of some aspects of "black" and "white" history and traditions and designed to promote a more factual and realistic view of those cultures, is evidently still very much in its initial stages. It is important with such a project not to indoctrinate the reader. This could very easily be done in our case by the sheer mechanics of selecting the sub-topics and source material. Selection after all is imperative. So the author cannot wholly avoid to guide the reader, but this can be done responsibly e.g. by relegating authorial comment to the notes or an appendix, and by using a contrastive presentation (European and African material on opposite pages). I have just drawn up a tentative table of contents and even a tentative title "Your Ancestors and Mine" ... My research in Germanic and Scandinavian traditions has led me to the view that this culture exhibits many archaic traits that could be presented along with corresponding traits in other, historically unconnected cultures, as African, Eskimo, or Red Indian. I would be happy to contribute with my research to a positive development and respect for a basically common heritage which may even be more important for the survival of humanity than we at present realize.

During the remainder of the time at my disposal I intend to illustrate my plans with a few examples taken from historical development, the structure of society, pagan religion, and oral tradition.

To start with Germanic "ethnogenesis" or "origins", I have always considered this quite problematical. The current view is that it is impossible to speak of Teutons before 500 BC (considered the time of the first sound shift). The schema of Germanic migrations and branchings into East, West and North Germanic tribes provided the theoretical model for the hypothetical Proto-Bantu, their branchings and migrations to the South. The model of the family tree and its opposite, the converging rivers, are perhaps only the two opposite ends of what may have been a continuum.

An interesting aspect of Germanic ethnogenesis is its connection with the discovery, production, and trade in local iron. The metal itself was discovered earlier by the Celts, but there was considerable Celtic influence especially in the area where Germanic ethnogenesis is assumed to have occurred. Iron production and trade contributed to create the economic basis of a differentiated social structure (development of an aristocracy). The accumulated wealth in turn manifests itself in outstanding works of art. A Southern African development clearly analogous to this has only been established comparatively recently: the significance of iron for the formation of early precursors of states in Southern Africa since the 2nd century AD. Here too, trade in iron products led to wealth and power. The works of art of that period, unknown to scholarship before, included specimens of the highest quality, as exemplified by the clay masks from Lydenburg (Eastern Transvaal) which can only be compared with the superb West African art from the medieval kingdom of Benin. And Lydenburg is more than half a millennium older (6th century AD)! It is obvious that the contribution of archaeology to the elucidation of societal structure can hardly be overestimated. It has been possible to investigate numerous Iron

Age settlements and furnaces in South Africa and Zimbabwe - settlements established without doubt long before White immigration. European archaeology, with its history of over a hundred years, has advanced to such a degree that it was possible to reconstruct Germanic society mainly on the basis of archaeological sources (Steuer 1982). Such investigations e.g. demonstrate the role of the extended family (Ger. Sippe) and the live-in servants (Ger. Gesinde with its different meaning from afr gesin) - this was vehemently contested previously - and other features, e.g. the role of the aristocracy or the acceptance of foreign culture elements (Gundestrup kettle, Dejbjerg wagon, Husby wagon grave).

We know that some Germanic tribes had kings, others not. Those however had sub-tribes with chiefs, like the others. We can archaeologically recognise an aristocracy from the 1st century BD. The ordinary male Teuton could make his voice heard in the regular local and district assemblies. This we know from historical sources. It is however difficult to generalise due to geographical and historical differences. The power of chiefs and kings was certainly not an absolute one. It was governed by accepted custom, so it was practically impossible at least for a Scandinavian king to do something in violation of established customs. This is evident in our sources on the Christianisation of Scandinavia. Kings could be, and were, deposed. Occasionally they also were sacrificed (in the case of drought, famine, or to avert a catastrophe). The powers of Germanic chiefs thus were comparable to those of African chiefs. In the event of war, their authority became more pronounced, due to the exigencies of militarisation. The relative freedom of the Germanic commoner was also made possible by the existence of a hereditary caste of slaves. Slavery was apparently less common in Southern African black societies than in protohistoric and early medieval Central and Northern Europe, and it was often not hereditary, so that intermarriage could and did take place (the only instance of hereditary slaves, mentioned on p. 272 of the 2nd edition of the Bantu-speaking Peoples of Southern Africa, 1974, concerns the [Tswana] Ngwato federation, one of the larger 19th century expansions of tribal realms, and may be attributable to the necessities of strong organisation.).

Germanic religion was, of course, distinctly polytheistic, with the gods having their definite sphere of competence (e.g. Freyr and Njoror - fertility of soil and water, Odin - war, poetry; aristocracy). African religion, in contrast, is not referred to as being polytheistic, but as "ancestor worship". Ancestors are primarily seen in the family context and are therefore not regarded as gods by Western scholars for whom the term god would designate a supernatural being worshipped by a larger group, at least like e.g. those Celtic gods identified with Roman deities, but subdivided and in a way set apart from them by the numerous epithets linking them with specific tribes. So what about the group ancestors? Place names like Modimolle ("the ancestor has eaten"), if referring to human sacrifices, would indicate a role of the African group ancestor which would not be incompatible with the usual conception of a god. In Germanic tradition, a god is often the ancestor of a tribe or of its royal line.

It is quite significant that there seems to have been almost a Germanic eagerness to take over foreign elements and conceptions in the religious sphere. Cf. e.g. the Celtic cult cauldron from Gundestrup (DK), the numerous religious sculptures in Roman Germany and Gaul, and even the

"supreme" god Odin/Wodan and his cousin Mercurius, whose Romano-Gaulish incarnation has to do not so much with the classical Mercurius (still known from older bank buildings), but rather with the changeable Germanic god of ecstasy. Where ecstasy was concerned, that accepted and ancient form of contact with the supernatural by means of the soul leaving the body (and returning to it), one was apparently particularly eager to learn how others managed to attain this state. The techniques of ecstasy which can be deduced from ON literature and from the Migration Age gold bracteates (amulets) in any case do show many significant similarities with elements of Siberian shamanism. These features were collected by me in 19968 and have recently led to the discovery of the very first Danish sorceress ever excavated. The lady lived in the 8th century AD, has Siberian grave goods and a magic pouch containing an ecstasy-inducing drug, henbane (*Hyoscyamus niger*).

The role of the so-called witchdoctor in Southern Africa is well known. This can certainly be compared to that of the Germanic sorcerer or shaman. Magic in general was of enormous significance in Europe until at least the last century and the large-scale move to the cities. Ecstasy as a magico-religious technique apparently does not occur with the Basotho, but well with Nguni groups. It is important in view of the acceptability of foreign elements in this context, that the foreign (Tsonga?) so-called malopo cult (cf. Boersema) is practised by some Sotho groups. The malopo cult does not include ecstasy proper, but definitely trance.

Finally a word on orality, which is of fundamental significance in Africa, where there was no writing, as well as in ancient Germania, where there was a script. The same, by the way, applies to literate societies as ancient as India and China. Folktales, myths and legends (Ger. Sagen) were transmitted orally in prose (with verse coming in in specific places and functions). Particularly warriors, women, children, animals and things. Boys in the initiation lodge are required to practise by praising themselves. This poetry extols certain deeds or abilities in a nominal style and a metaphorical way. In Scandinavia too (9th to 15th century AD), we have a corpus of elaborate praise poetry (Skaldic poetry). Interestingly this includes, as in Africa, poetic criticism which sometimes is quite insulting, if at all transmitted. One poet (Sighvatr) even criticises the Norwegian king for allowing his soldiers to wreak havoc in an 11th century kind of state of emergency. The poem persuades the king to repent, and all is well. These were the good old times. To quote now from the Transkei Public Security Act of 1977, "it is an offence for any person to make any statement, verbally or in writing, or perform any act which is intended or likely to have the effect of subverting or interfering with the authority of any chief or headman", and it is an offence to treat any chief or headman "with disrespect, contempt or ridicule or fail or neglect to show that respect and obedience and to render such service to such chief or headman as should be shown or rendered in accordance with customary laws" (Opland, *Isolation* p. 192). The act had of course not been passed for nothing. Let us therefore rather quote a Ciskei poet (Sizwe Mayoli, *Indiluleko yase Sieskei*, a poem on Ciskei's independence on 4 Dec 1981): "An imgongi / with his forgotten name praised the head of the state / for leading people to the unknown". In 1985 I was present myself when the black praise poet, being asked whether he had really improvised, spontaneously

replied to the sceptic (a white professor, naturally):

Do you know anything at all about Zulu and Xhosa?  
Where do you come from, for the affairs of your people  
are your own affairs?  
Leave the Xhosa and the Zulu alone  
to look, after the Nguni languages,  
for this country is in trouble.  
Once we were people, but oh our misfortune  
brought by your fathers, the gents of the West!  
They shattered and scattered us,  
for the English ground us underfoot,  
while the Boers blunted our horns,  
and the French turned their backs,  
today the Germans just watch us." Zulu ... p. 18

Why the Germans are so leniently dealt with here, I do not know. Does the poet consider them to be poets and philosophers like himself and only as colonialists of a less noxious kind?

In any event Africans have accepted the value of a Western education. Or should one be able to detect ironic undertones in my colleague Themba Msimang's praise of UNISA (11. 4. 87), Zeiss p. 33)?

Congratulations great divers!  
You who dived deep and returned with a burning firebrand!  
Those who dring in shallow pools draw back mud.  
Congratulations high soaring eagles!  
You who soar and pierce the heavens  
Causing the spring of wisdom  
To flow down the fountain at UNISA,  
I drank from it and was like the one possessed,  
From sunrise to sunset I caress Miss Books;  
Even at midnight I am caressing Miss Books ...  
Congratulations to UNISA warriors  
Whose regiments have been formed by Theo, child of van Wijk!  
Formed by the descendant of van den Bogaerde! ...  
You gather them from all over the country,  
Even the Zulus abandon the shield and the assegai,  
They brandish the pen and the pencil.  
Everybody is brought before Hiemstra, conferrer of degrees  
Who adorns them with hoods and they swagger like finches,  
For even the ugly says: "I am beautiful!" ...

Another attitude is evident from the following 19th century verses mocking  
a Christian boy (Guma 141):

A book-reader, a reader of nonsense,  
an uncircumcised boy in his fear  
says: don't you see that I am holy,  
that I have been influenced by the school atmosphere?

The "holy" stuffiness of school atmosphere, made in South Africa or rather adapted there, probably could not protect the fearful boy against his

tougher initiated age-mates. Likewise the university is not a magic wall that could protect its inmates or graduates against misfortune or against progress. It could not do this even if it were the apex of Western civilisation. It remains however meritorious to contribute to the spread of knowledge and the fight against ignorance, arrogance and prejudice.

To sum up: A contrastive overview of South African and archaic European societies could prove a worthwhile undertaking, not the least so in the present-day South African context. Among the many aspects of such a project, let me emphasize, in conclusion, the possibilities inherent in studying the contact between different civilisations at various points in history: Celts and Teutons, Romans and "Barbarians", medieval scholars and pagan Scandinavians, 19th century missionaries and African tribespeople. German scholars of the early ninth century AD wrote lengthy treatises to prove that God could not only be worshipped in Latin and Greek, but also in German. A millennium later the Prussian Missionsdirektor Wangemann relates a vision with God himself speaking beautiful Northern Sotho. I sincerely hope it is no longer necessary to invoke supernatural confirmation for the basic equality of humankind.



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# ÖST- OCH VÄSTNORDISK RECEPTION AV HELGONLEGENDER. LIKHETER OCH SKILLNADER

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## 1. Inledning

Den folkspråkliga legenden är en europeisk genre som under den tidiga medeltiden vann stor popularitet. Genren representeras i Norden främst av översättningar från latin. Mellan öst- och västnordisk genreception föreligger vissa skillnader. Mitt syfte nu är att visa och diskutera dessa.

Med Västnorden menas i det följande Norge-Island. Det är ofta svårt att avgöra vad som är norskt eller isländskt; en islänning kan ha skrivit en norsk handskrift under besök i Norge, norska original kan ha blivit avskrivna på Island osv (se t ex Widding 1969, s 51 ff). Med östnordiskt menas svensk + danskt material. För Östnorden kommer i första hand det svenska materialet användas (det danska materialet är betydligt mindre).

År 1963 presenterade Widding, Bekker-Nielsen och Shook *The Lives of the Saints in Old Norse Prose. A Handlist*. Detta ska vara en fullständig förteckning av medeltida hagiografiskt prosamaterial från Västnorden. Några år tidigare hade Gad (1961) redogjort för det forndanska hagiografiska materialet i sin dissertation *Legenden i dansk middelalder*. Liknande arbeten om den fornsvenska legendens reception saknas (den utförligaste översikten av det svenska materialet ges av Geete och Collijn 1903, 1919, 1945, förteckningen av legender är dock inte fullständig). För mitt avhandlingsarbete med den fornsvenska legendens texthistoria har jag byggt upp en databas med utgångspunkt i handskrifterna. Denna databas ligger, jämte Widding m fl:s och Gads arbeten, till grund för följande framställning.

I databasen finns 561 fornsvenska legender från drygt 50 handskrifter. Sammanlagt är 191 helgon representerade. Dessa siffror motsvarar i Widding m fl:s *Handlist* närmare 600 legender fördelade på ungefär 300 handskrifter, 132 helgon är representerade. I Danmark rör det sig generellt om lägre tal.

Dessa siffror visar tre stora skillnader mellan det norröna materialet och det östnordiska. (1) Antalet legendtexter är fler i det norröna materialet, (2) antalet handskrifter är fler, samtidigt som (3) antalet helgon är färre. Dessa skillnader kommer jag dock inte att ta upp här.

En jämförelse mellan Väst- och Östnorden försvåras av bl a kronologiska förhållanden. I figuren på nästa sida åskådliggörs hur pass problematiskt det är att göra en rättvis jämförelse mellan de olika nordiska områdena med utgångspunkt i handskrifterna. De bevarade fvn legenderna är äldre (de flesta norröna legendsamlingarna är från ca 1300-1400, de flesta östnordiska från 1400-1500). Vidare är över hälften av de norröna samlingarna fragmentariska och en stor del har endast bevarats i eftermedeltida handskrifter. Det troliga är att i Östnorden var den latinska legenden allenarådande under äldre medeltid.