

## Det germanska spåret

*L.Lönnroth*

September 29–30, 2017

The central part of the book consists in giving the relatively uninitiated reader synopses of and commentaries on the central works of the remarkable achievements of Icelandic medieval literature. We are talking about the collections of Snorre Sturlason from the 13th century and his *Havamal* and *Edda*, but also about the Sagas, the lesser ones concerning the lives of kings, the greater ones of the fates and vicissitudes of entire families over generations, of which *Njal's Saga* may be the greatest, or at least the best known. Those Sagas are actually not only of historical interest, which is the case with most of early Germanic writings, but do defend their place among the Canon of Western Literature (if there ever was one). As to the presentations of them provided by the author, they may be seen as a bit too perfunctory, on the other hand you do not want to be told too much, your appetite should merely be whetted, not satisfied, after all there is no substitute for the real thing; and they do actually work as inspiration to seek out the stories themselves. I have in fact read *Njal's saga* in a Swedish translation back in 1977, but have to admit innocence of Egil Skallagrimson's.

The Icelandic sagas do not only have literary value but also cultural and historical, and the natural question is why Iceland, this harsh and sparsely populated island in the middle of nowhere<sup>1</sup>. The period in which those great sagas were written down was after all a very brief period, essentially the 13th century, and although Icelandic literature did not stop with it but carried on even more productively, its great originality still belongs to those days. The phenomenon calls for history, what can the Icelandic Sagas in particular and early Germanic literature in general tell us about the enigmatic prehistory of Germanic people, which in its turn brings on meta-history, in this case being the history of the search of the history of the Germanic people. The author identifies two phases of the latter, the early one of the 17th century, epitomized by the fantasies of a Rudbeck (otherwise an intelligent and distinguished Swedish scientist), and the latter one of the late 18th century and flourishing during the 19th, and which during the 20th century was deformed into a caricature. The two phases were of course interrelated, the former just being an immature precursor of the latter. The romantic idea of the Germanic people has many parallels, the most obvious one being the Celtic revival of the 18th century associated with James McPherson and his *Songs of Ossian* which caught the imagination of the literary classes in Europe (Goethe was an admirer, and David Hume was charmed, not exhibiting his commendable skepticism he cultivated as a philosopher, but Samuel Johnson was doubtful). It eventually turned out to be a big fraud in the end, but as modern post-modernistic

---

<sup>1</sup> as I recall two American tourists exclaim looking at the map on a stop-over at Keplavik on my first trip on Icelandic in 1977. By flying to Luxembourg you could in the 70's cross the Atlantic very cheaply, this was before Laker and Peoples Express in the early 80's, and after the possibility of youthfare in the early 70's.

opinion would have it: What's the big deal, history is fiction anyway, what matters is if it is a good yarn. Other parallels which have been considered more respectable is the idea of the special mission of the Slavic people which took root in early 19th century Russia. Dostoevsky was a great proponent of it, a later one is the distinguished recently deceased Russian mathematician Shafarevich, who was ostracized for his views by more politically correct Western colleagues. And of course one should not forget the creation of a Finnish nation after its territorial cessation to Russia in 1809. A nation needs a national myth and epic, and out of somewhere Kalevala was born, the question of authenticity inevitably arises in the skeptical reader. And then of course in a Post-Colonial world the issue of magic beginnings becomes a very general one. Just as all people are supposed to be of equal worth, the same goes for cultures and languages, and searching for the roots of the down-trodden is now considered a much commendable activity.

To return to the issue of Germanic culture it experienced a particular urgency in Scandinavia, after all Scandinavia was the last Germanic territories to be Christianized<sup>2</sup> and thus seen to be closest to their pagan past. After all Southern Scandinavia is dotted with runic inscriptions, something which you do not find on the continent<sup>3</sup> and only sparsely in the British Isles. And Iceland is considered the epitome of Scandinavia and closest to its heroic Norse roots. At this time the idea of the Viking took root in the European imagination, and still, in spite of Scandinavian social well-fare and furniture, it is with Vikings the Scandinavians are most vividly associated. When it comes to Sweden it is tempting to suspect that the loss of Finland (an integral part of the country) made the need to cultivate a heroic distant past even more urgent than during its brief Great Power status when the need was more of a propagandistic nature than a consolatory. As the author notes, the romantic Norse influence in Swedish education survived into the 60's<sup>4</sup>. There were also romantic Germanic revivals in England and Germany, but what about the Netherlands? On this the author does not inform. One may, perhaps stretching it a bit, include the pre-Raphaelites in it as well as the leader of the Arts and Craft movement William Morris, who was intimately associated with the former, but maybe it would be going too far to include their common root - John Ruskin - even if he had a lot of things to say about the Gothic northern influence. In fact the real revival came later in the 20th century and then took on a much more idiosyncratic character focused on the individual of Tolkien and his

---

<sup>2</sup> In Europe as a whole this distinction belongs to the Finnish and the Baltic people, including the extinct Prussians.

<sup>3</sup> except Jutland of course

<sup>4</sup> As a young boy I was fed on the relatively recent heroic past of Swedish history, abetted by reading Topelius 'Fältskärens Berättelser' and even more so having access to 'Folkskolans Läsebok' stemming from my paternal grandfather, a 'folkskollärare', rather out of date that time. It was also in this book I mainly came in contact with the Nordic Mythology, although we early on were made to read some Icelandic stories, which I found rather primitive and not engrossing at all. My last year at 'Realskolan' we were assigned Tegnér's 'Fritjofs Saga' which we found rather pathetic and could not understand our teacher, born 1905, who claimed that in her youth they had all found it very exciting. I do suspect though that would I read it now, I would take a much more indulgent view. In retrospect it strikes me as incredible that this book would be assigned as late as fifty years ago, in a sense there is then a greater gulf between me and my children than between me and my grandparents.

fantasies which with the 'Lord of the Rings' spawned a whole genre of literature. In Germany the revival is associated with Wagner whose idea of a Gesamtkunstwerk has actually captivated generations of acolytes. Hitler never read Nietzsche, and if he had he probably would not have made head or tail of him, but he absorbed the music of the erstwhile idol of the latter. It is supposedly an open question on how much Wagnerism gave birth to the ideology of Nazism, but the suggestion seems rather far-fetched to me, but undeniably it influenced it quite a lot, which is something quite different. The symbolism of Runes and the Myth of invincible Heroes supplied the movement with a certain lustre, some would even claim that at its roots Nazism was nothing but politics seen as pure Art (not of the possible, as Bismarck claimed, but of the impossible that Hitler sought). A giant Wagnerian production with its own *Götterdämmerung*. It has been said that Hitler looked at architecture as a means of producing great ruins, all the while having the eventual doom in mind. Nowadays runes are being appropriated by so called Neo-Nazis, and I guess it would be hopeless to disassociate the Swastika from its Nazi connections, although it has a respectable pedigree in both Greek and Hindu culture (and still does in the latter). The topic is a sorry one, and the most interesting the author has to say about it, is that the regime's attempts to revive Germanic culture on a grand scale failed miserably. The larger public soon got bored with the bombast, 'Negro' Jazz would certainly have met with a much wider public response, maybe only academics could have found in the elaborations of the myths, if not enjoyment at least nourishment. Now we come to the most interesting and intriguing part, namely the history of the Germanic people.

We know a lot of the Greeks, and maybe even more about the Romans. They fascinate us because they both come across as very modern and also very alien. Their modernity is what first strikes us, their 'alieness' is something we only gradually begin to appreciate, after all they are pre-Christians we are being told and thus fundamentally different morally. Greek Civilization goes back thousands of years, although admittedly the early part is only archeological, and were actually more unknown to the Classical Greeks than it is to us now. But Germanic history is very recent, but because of the scarcity of historical evidence, it appears much more ancient as if buried in the deep dawn of human history. Basically literacy came with Christianity so all the written sources are deeply influenced by the latter, and as a consequence also by Classical Greco-Roman culture. What is original Pagan becomes a matter of speculation, or more charitably a purely forensic exercise, the obscurity of which makes it not only frustrating but tantalizing as well. The most tangible evidence of a factual background is given by the parallelism of different literary texts be they of Scandinavian, British or German origin. But how far do they go back really? Maybe only to the time of the great migrations, of which the Viking raids constitute the last whimpers. What about the Mythology of the old Norse deities, which shows some striking parallels with Greek and Roman? Should one think of those as stemming from a common Indo-European one, later to have diverged? Or could it even be a fairly recent invention modeled on the Classical mode? That surely would be a prosaic and hence disappointing explanation. It was not until the time of the Roman disintegration and the subsequent migrational turmoil that the German tribes came into their own and conquered, if briefly large parts of Europe, and then like the tide, retreating after its flood. Some of the tribes disappeared and became extinct but it is not exactly clear what is meant by that. My

father always told me that categorizing people as regard with language is one thing, it is at least well-defined, but to categorize according to race is quite another and quite elusive and hence something not to take seriously. Is there a relationship between race and language? It is a romantic one but hardly one which can be corroborated. What language did our distant forefathers speak in Scandinavia? Could it have been a Finnish type language? Languages are like waves, they ride on water, but it is not the water which moves laterally, only its vertical movement per se. Languages conquer not by people but by imitation. The idea that Indo-European Germanic invaders displaced Finnish speaking people is as brutal as naive. Similarly the extension of the Slavic people used to reach to the Elbe and beyond <sup>5</sup>, but it is not clear that they were replaced by Germans, maybe they only began to speak German, thus making the expulsion of Germans across Oder unfair, genetically being as much Slavs as those that replaced them, having in their turn been expelled from father East<sup>6</sup>. Yet the romanticism of the connection of language and race is a very potent one. Our Native language is a communal property with which we have a most intimate relation and nothing is more conducive to a wider social identity<sup>7</sup>. Thus when I read about the Burgunds in a book by Norman Davies with two examples of their vocabulary recognizing words which could have been Swedish I experience a deep connection with those unknown people, which of course is but a beautiful conceit. Incidentally the early Germanic languages appear totally incomprehensible to modern Germanic speakers. The texts supplied would make no sense without translations, and only retrospectively can we discern the connections, occasionally highlighted by intermittent words almost unchanged.

So once again why Iceland? Christianity came fairly early to Iceland and became established by the year 1000. But unlike in Scandinavia, Pagan culture was not persecuted in the same way, and thus had a better chance of being transmitted and remembered. Pagan culture on the continent and on the British Isles laid further back in time and faded during a longer period.

October 1, 2017 **Ulf Persson:** *Prof.em, Chalmers U.of Tech., Göteborg Sweden* ulfp@chalmers.se

---

<sup>5</sup> As exemplified by the German city of Torgau, related to the Swedish word 'torg' loaned from the Slavic language and incidentally reappearing in the Finnish city Turku. It was actually at Torgau the American and Soviet invading armies met, far east of what later would become the division between East and West Germany.

<sup>6</sup> There is the notion of the Curzon line playing an important role in the redrawing of maps after 1945.

<sup>7</sup> How should you react to people who racially are very different from you but with whom you share a Native tongue since birth? Should not voice trump sight? Your native tongue has been with you since the beginning of time, because psychologically your existence extends infinitely far back. Also the ability of every normal human child to acquire the language spoken at its birth and on, the strongest biological argument for the equality between races. Thus a remarkable coincidence of an objective materialistic argument and a subjective idealistic one