Interrogating the "Germanic": A Category and Its Use in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages. Edited by Matthias Friedrich & James M. Harland. (Ergänzungsbände zum Reallexikon der Germanischen Altertumskunde 123). Berlin/Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2021. Pp. vi, 270. Hardcover/PDF/EPUB. €99.95.

doi: 10.1017/S1470542721000246

Reviewed by George Walkden**,** *University of Konstanz*

This collection of essays has its origins in a 2016 workshop of the same title held at the University of York. The contributions within problematize – in different ways – the concept of the "Germanic" as applied to late antiquity and the early Middle Ages.

For readers of this journal – linguists working on Germanic languages – and especially for those with a historical bent, it's a book with a lot to offer. First, it contains two chapters by Germanic linguists, Ludwig Rübekeil and Nelson Goering, and the relevance of these chapters for such an audience is self-evident. Secondly, the volume's remaining contributors come from a variety of different backgrounds: history, including art history, legal history, and more, literary studies, and anthropology. Readers with a linguistic background can use these contributions to get a good sense of recent developments in adjacent fields – useful since the

go-to linguistic textbooks on early Germanic languages frequently present a somewhat outdated picture of the state of the art in these disciplines.

Engaging with other disciplines is all the more crucial for linguists who teach and research in these areas, given the resurgence of white supremacist movements around the world and the widespread appropriation of early "Germanic" motifs by these movements, as well as their ongoing mainstreaming. As Kulikowski notes in his contribution, "[t]he idea of the Germanic has been put to some truly horrific uses" (p. 29). Runic symbology, for instance, was found on the guns of Norwegian terrorist Anders Breivik, and in the manifesto of Christchurch shooter Brendan Tarrant, both of whom were candid about their affiliation with white supremacist organizations. In light of these events, the strategy common among Germanic linguists and medievalists of "ignore them and hope they go away" is seeming more and more like a tactical blunder; instead, scholars need to challenge these movements directly, and part of this involves rooting out dated, romanticizing interpretations of the past wherever they are found. Here, linguists can play their part.

The third respect in which this book will be of interest to linguists is as a study of semantic variation and change – specifically, as regards the meaning of the term "Germanic" itself. Though they do not frame themselves as semantic studies, many of the contributions highlight the variable and at times contradictory reference of the term and its cognates throughout history. Steinacher notes that Posidonius, writing in the first century BCE, introduces the Germanoi as a Celtic tribe (p.38), and Zosimus (c. 500) writes of "Germanoi and other Celtic peoples" (p. 51). Similarly, Donecker's paper points out that for Heinrich Bebel, writing a millennium later in 1509, Huns were a Germanic people (p. 67), and for his contemporary Johann Aventinus, "Celts" or "Galatians" also referred to Germans (p. 82).

Țăranu, in his wide-ranging paper, claims that "whenever two scholars say "Germanic", the thing to which they refer is always different" (p. 89). Another term that is put under the microscope is *barbarus* and its cognates – particularly in the chapters by Egetenmeyr and by Harland. Elsewhere in the literature, such labels are also receiving intense scrutiny: see, for instance, Flierman's (2017) careful study of the use of the term "Saxons" (*Saxones*) between 150–900, which puts to rest any notion that it stably denoted an ethnic group during this period.

In what follows I briefly summarize each of the contributions. The editors' introduction contextualizes the debate around the "Germanic", particularly as regards its ethnic interpretation. They are at pains to emphasize that ethnicity is a situational construct: (types of) pots aren't people(s), and, on purely logical grounds, archaeological material simply does not and cannot license inferences about ethnicity. Friedrich & Harland suggest that we need to move past acrimonious inside-baseball academic disputes so that we can better "oppose the racist and ethnonationalist agendas which draw upon interpretations of the late antique world as an ideological resource" (p. 7).

Michael Kulikowski's paper is about the "Gleichung germanisch-deutsch", and theories of population movements, with reference to Tacitus's Germania. He trenchantly observes that sixteenth-century scholarship first began talking about migrations toward Rome at the same time as "savages" were being encountered by colonizers in the Americas. His contribution outlines the history of relevant historical and archaeological research and some desiderata for its future, including the need for "adequate language" and for appropriate self-criticism. Roland Steinacher's chapter, meanwhile, is on the history of the term Germani and how it was used from its invention onward, with a focus on (late) antiquity. He points out, in

particular, that the tripartite division of peoples into West Germanic, East Germanic, and North Germanic "was an eighteenth- and nineteenth-century linguistic construct" (p. 32), and that the ethnolinguistic notion of Germanic was "given new strength by linguistic theories" – a point about the broader impact of linguistic theorising that linguists would do well to reflect on. On the other hand, there is no evidence that the term was ever used as an endonym (pp. 32–3, p. 52). Stefan Donecker's chapter is on "Re-inventing the "Germanic" in the Early Modern Era", picking up on some of the same themes. He shows convincingly that early modern scholars had alternatives to ethnonym theories, e.g. that the names referred to types of warriors, or to specific warbands (pp. 78–9) – but that nevertheless the term "developed from a loose and flexible ethnic umbrella term into an effective and omnipresent keyword of nationalist discourse" (p. 68). Like Steinacher, Donecker highlights the role of linguistic categorization in shaping the perception of fixed ethnic groups with identifiable boundaries.

The ambitious chapter by Cătălin Țăranu, ranging over heroic poetry, archaeology, and legal history, aims to offer not a history but a Foucauldian geneaology of the term "Germanic". Among other things, he argues persuasively that ninth-century Carolingian "Gothicism" is a precursor to use of the category "Germanic" in the modern period. Meanwhile, Otávio Luiz Vieira Pinto's chapter provides a cultural anthropologist's perspective on ethnicity and how it can be applied to the Middle Ages. Engaging in detail with definitions of ethnicity itself, he posits that Roman power actually creates fictive ethnicities in the sense of Balibar (1991), and that today's "Germanic" category comes about through the interplay of Roman accounts and modern scholarship. Michael J. Kelly's chapter zooms in to take a closer look at the reception of Visigothic legal literature, focusing on the *Liber Iudiciorum* of seventh-century Iberia – which, as Kelly shows, is not adequately described as "Germanic" under any reading,

regardless of how the term is used elsewhere. He illustrates how the category arises from modern editorial decisions, taken from the seventeenth century onwards.

Veronika Egetenmeyr's paper has a slightly different focus from most of the others, in that it looks at the term *barbarus* and its development, particularly in the work of the Gallo-Roman aristocrat Sidonius Apollinaris. She demonstrates that Apollinaris's use of the term was a complex one, drawing on traditional conventions but also departing from them in significant respects. She also cautions against taking the token frequency of a term to indicate the importance of the underlying concept – in Apollinaris's writings, Romanness and barbarianhood are omnipresent despite the terms themselves occurring relatively infrequently. The *habitus barbarus* – a costume of Roman military origin (von Rummel 2007) – is central to the chapter by James Harland, who reevaluates the archaeological evidence relating to migrations in late antique Britain. Applying Deleuze & Guattari's (1987) thinking to evidence from the cemetery at Spong Hill, he aims to shift the goalposts away from narrowly ethnocentric approaches by illustrating how Roman ideology shapes the behaviour of fifth-century immigrants – a military, post-Imperial norm. Along the way he points out that we need to "reject the entirely baseless notion that there existed in the fifth century a mutually recognized 'Germanic' ideology" (p. 157).

Steve Walker's chapter also focuses on archaeological evidence, and takes up the vexed question of identity in fifth-century Britain. He argues against the view that there was a violent invasion: the migration involved was "a steady stream rather than a great wave" (p. 192). As support for the idea that the advance of peoples across what is now England was a cultural phenomenon rather than a military one, he points out that the archaeological evidence for migration seems to stop at the Tees-Exe line, which had been an influential

cultural divide since much earlier. Walker acknowledges that linguistic evidence constitutes a *prima facie* challenge for his hypothesis (p. 204), as indeed it apparently does for other, similar hypotheses (see e.g. Oosthuizen 2019); the extent to which the linguistic evidence can be reinterpreted in the light of new archaeologically-motivated scenarios is a question crying out for linguists' attention. With the chapter by Sebastian Brather we move across the Channel, focusing on the distribution of "Germanic" and "Slavic" populations of East Central Europe between the fifth and the seventh centuries. Brather argues that "[a]ntique perceptions of Germans and of Slavs were *not* based on language" (p. 220), and that more generally there is no reason to assume a simple correlation of language, perception and material culture. Instead, "[r]esearch should focus on cultural changes in a more unbiased fashion, and should expect more complex explanations ... separating material culture from language development as well as from identity" (p. 222).

The following two chapters engage directly with linguistic evidence. Ludwig Rübekeil looks at Germanic words in classical texts, in particular three words: *framea*, *alcis* and *gl(a)esum*. The latter, for instance, is used by Tacitus, and described as a Germanic word for amber (though it's used by the Aestii, who are not described as speaking a Germanic language). Though the "Romans had a rather disturbed relationship with foreign languages in general, and the *vocabula peregrina* in particular" (p. 237), Rübekeil does not call for radical pessimism: the words' histories do yield to closer examination. In the next chapter, Nelson Goering notes that a particular kind of metre has consistently been referred to as Germanic, and sets out to investigate how well this dovetails with other senses in which the term has been used – especially the linguistic sense. The mapping from "Germanic" verse to "Germanic" languages turns out not to be a straightforward one: a particularly intriguing case is Gothic, in which – according to Pascual (2016) – the absence of alliterative verse is not

accidental. Pascual claims that the "heaviness requirement" familiar from early North and West Germanic languages did not exist in Gothic, and hence Gothic could not have had alliterative verse of the form found in those languages. Goering calls this into question by arguing that Gothic probably did have the heaviness requirement after all, and hence that it can also be reconstructed for Proto-Germanic. His conclusion is that the heaviness requirement is a necessary – but not sufficient – condition for a language to develop verse forms of the kind found in early Northwest Germanic languages. This gives us a potential "soft link" between language and identity, and Goering suggests that this may account for the perceived cultural link sometimes mentioned in later literary traditions.

The final chapter is by Erin Sebo. It deals with heroism and martial honour in Old English poetry, and the extent to which it can be said to reflect a "Germanic" ideal. She shows that there are many discrepancies between Tacitus's Germanic ideal and the picture we find in Old English verse. While the ideal relationships depicted in Tacitus's *Germania* are hierarchical, in Old English works such as Maxims I and II there is a focus on mutual bonds between peers. Meanwhile, in stark contrast to the Tacitean ideal, Beowulf in his interactions with the coastguard and with Hrothgar's court seems to deliberately downplay his genealogical credentials, flagrantly flouting the norms of the "economy of honour". This diversity casts substantial doubt upon any uncritical reading of the *Germania* as descriptive of actual practice.

All in all, the volume is a fine reevaluation of a category – the "Germanic" – which has enjoyed a long shelf life, if a slippery one. The editors of the *Ergänzungsbände zum Reallexikon der germanischen Altertumskunde*, in which this volume appears, should be congratulated for their willingness to invite critique of the very foundations on which the

series stands. One question that immediately arises is what to do with the term: should we abandon it, relativize its use, or do something else entirely? In the same fields, recent work has made the case that "Anglo-Saxon" as a term should be avoided, in view of its homogenizing effect and its consistent associations with whiteness throughout the modern period (see Rambaran-Olm 2018, 2020; Vernon 2018: ch. 1; Wilton 2020). Moreover, these authors show that the term was not regularly used by writers in early England as a self-description (as already recognized by Reynolds 1985). Given that similar arguments can be made for "Germanic", should the term be kicked into the long grass? Beyond showing in many cases that the term is not a useful or applicable one in their context, contributors do not take a unified stance on this. To be sure, the abolition of the term has been advocated before: Egetenmeyr in her chapter (p. 149) cites Jarnut (2004) as arguing for this. Țăranu explicitly argues that "[e]liminating the term itself is not a solution" (p. 100). Instead, we should be drawing its genealogy every time we use it: "we might as well rigorously define our own use of the word, while having no illusions that we can tame it or confine it to the rigours of one discipline alone."

Ultimately the fate of the term is likely to be a contingent and discipline-specific one. In linguistics, as Goering points out, "'Germanic' is reasonably precisely defined … referring to the languages that derive from Proto-Germanic: a well-agreed-upon set of languages and dialects" (p. 241). There are, of course, boundary disputes: for instance, if creoles are not monogenetically descended from their lexifiers, then whether or not a particular variety is a creole will determine whether or not it is a Germanic variety. Such debates are often lively, and by no means free of ideological baggage. In addition, the precise structure of the Germanic family is still a matter of active debate: witness the recent discussion of whether English is a North or West Germanic language (e.g. Bech & Walkden 2016), and Hartmann's

(2020) proposal that East Germanic may not in fact form a coherent subgroup. But the category itself does not pose any great problems from a narrowly linguistic perspective. The situation is dramatically different in history, archaeology, anthropology, and literary studies: as an outsider reading the chapters in this volume, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that the category is otiose, and that the term is only useful for these disciplines when looking inward, at their own historiographies. Most dangerous of all is when conflations of "Germanic" in different disciplinary senses are allowed to pass uncontested. For any given phenomenon, it could in principle be the case that the archaeologically "Germanic" lines up with the linguistically "Germanic", for instance. But any such correlation needs to be argued for, not presupposed, and the term's denotation and use-conditions in each domain need to be made clear. And as regards ethnicity, in particular, it may not be possible even in principle to argue for a correlation, given the nature of the empirical evidence we have (Harland's chapter makes this point particularly forcefully). Germanic unity should not be the null hypothesis, and caution is needed – at the very least – when extending the term beyond its linguistic sense.

References

Balibar, Étienne. 1991. The nation form: history and ideology. *Race, nation, class: ambiguous identities*, ed. by Étienne Balibar & Immanuel M. Wallerstein, 86–106. London: Verso.

Bech, Kristin, & George Walkden. 2016. English is (still) a West Germanic language. *Nordic Journal of Linguistics* 39(1). 65–100.

Deleuze, Gilles, & Félix Guattari. 1987. *A thousand plateaus: capitalism and schizophrenia*. Trans. Brian Massumi. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press.

Flierman, Robert. 2017. *Saxon identities, AD 150–900*. London: Bloomsbury.

Hartmann, Frederik. 2020. *The Vandalic language: origins and relationships*. Heidelberg: Carl Winter.

Jarnut, Jörg. 2004. Germanisch: Plädoyer für die Abschaffung eines obsoleten Zentralbegriffes der Frühmittelalterforschung. *Die Suche nach den Ursprüngen: Von der Bedeutung des frühen Mittelalters*, ed. by Walter Pohl, 111–113. Vienna: Verlag ÖAW.

Oosthuizen, Susan. 2019. *The emergence of the English*. Leeds: Arc Humanities Press.

Pascual, Rafael J. 2016. Old English metrical history and the composition of *Widsið*. *Neophilologus* 100. 289–302.

Rambaran-Olm, Mary. 2018. Anglo-Saxon studies, academia and white supremacy. https://mrambaranolm.medium.com/anglo-saxon-studies-academia-and-white-supremacy-17c87b360bf3.

Rambaran-Olm, Mary. 2020. History bites: resources on the problematic term "Anglo-Saxon". https://mrambaranolm.medium.com/history-bites-resources-on-the-problematic-term-anglo-saxon-part-1-9320b6a09eb7.

Reynolds, Susan C. 1985. What do we mean by "Anglo-Saxon" and "Anglo-Saxons"? *Journal of British Studies* 24(4). 395–414.

Vernon, Matthew X. 2018. *The Black Middle Ages: race and the construction of the Middle Ages*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

von Rummel, Philipp. 2007. *Habitus barbarus: Kleidung und Repräsentation spätantiker Eliten im 4. und 5. Jahrhundert*. Berlin: De Gruyter.

Wilton, David. 2020. What do we mean by Anglo-Saxon? Pre-Conquest to the present. *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 119(4). 425–454.