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Review of *Interrogating the Germanic: A Category and its Use in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages* edited by J.M Harland and M. Freidrich

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*Interrogating the 'Germanic': A Category and its Use in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages*  
(*Ergänzungsbände Zum Reallexikon der Germanischen Altertumskunde*)

Edited by Matthias Friedrich and James M. Harland

De Gruyter, 2020

216 pp.

Few are quite so blessed as the Chinese and Egyptians whose written records extend to the prehistoric Neverland of others. Most are fortunate not to have this employed as an argument against their existence. Germanics, however, are not so lucky. *Interrogating the Germanic* claims to be “skeptical about the notion of Germanic antiquity,” skewering the subject as an “invention of the early modern period.” Tellingly, the real target is not so much the barbaric tribes over the Rhine, nor even twentieth-century Nazis, but political dissidents who—with various degrees of historical illiteracy—seek to impose their agendas upon the Germanics as an ideological resource.

The main issue with the book’s approach is that every identity crumples under such an avalanche of doubt and scrutiny, especially when the bar for survival (i.e. credible evidence) is so high. Additionally, analysis that seeks to debunk concepts consisting of “constructions” has little purchase. Many things considered good or true (most of society’s apparatus for instance) are artificial in a cultural sense. There’s also a certain naivety (or history’s first sin, an overreliance on written sources) in believing concepts are coterminous with their nomenclature when in reality many precede language. For example, it’s perfectly possible for the Germanics to have understood themselves as a single (or a closely related) people long before they invented a term to encapsulate the sentiment.

While the intellectual gymnastics involved in finessing the Germanics out of existence is impressive most readers will find themselves sympathizing with an opponent who counters that identities created by oppressive colonizers (such as Rome) aren’t necessarily—by virtue of an asymmetry of power, or “punching down” in the vernacular—inaccurate. Ascribing qualities to an identity need not be so very distant from the genuine possession of those traits. Not everything is ignorance (poor ethnography) or bad faith (a political sleight of hand). There are risks to confusing lazy cynicism with cutting skepticism.

Nevertheless much of the scholarship, when it focuses on specific historical case studies, is excellent. Steve Walker’s chapter, “Farewell to Arms: A Germanic Identity in Fifth-Century Britain”, for instance is superlative, especially its compelling theory on how the English tongue might have spread without the adventus Saxonum being a large hostile affair.

Yet the overall effect of the scholarly pointillism is to round off the sharp corners of conventional historiographical narratives rather than overhaul them. Thanks to figures such as Walter Goffart, Walter Pohl, and Guy Halsall few now consider the *Volkerwanderung* (the French *vagues germaniques*) to have comprised hermetically-sealed billiard balls. However, it’s equally difficult to conceive these tribes as anything but highly mobile, largely militant Germanics motivated by a core of warrior freemen (with usual caveats)—no matter how many potshots one takes at Peter Heather for eschewing the Vienna School.

## Regarding Politics and History

Overall, the text is haphazard. While its editors are correct to implore archaeologists to stop mislabeling peoples simply because they enjoyed Germanic ornaments or fashions, it is gauche to shun the use of “Anglo-Saxon” on the basis it “justifies white supremacism and colonialism” when it is the most accurate ethnonym, a clear precursor to the Angelcynn (English kin).

Moreover, neither editor can claim to be donning their finest historical hats when they express “discomfort” and urge that “more be done to refute the [genetic] evidence [of Germanic migration to Britain]” that Stephen Leslie gathered. Finally, when both request that scholars reverse-engineer research by “engaging more with the wider social context in which their work is received,” this sounds like a barely encoded plea for the impossible task of attempting to make conclusions invulnerable to appropriation by political dissidents.

Aligning politics rather than history in the crosshairs, *Interrogating the Germanic* less seeks the destruction of the Germanic identity (which is safely enshrined in literature, linguistics, law codes etc.) than its renunciation as no longer “useful” to archaeology or history. A claim belied by countless scholars whom the authors are forced to cite in order to scold. Besides, it’s clear why intellectuals refuse to ditch the term, as when Harland tries to evade it he is soon forced off-piste. His belief that a new framing of late Roman ideology might be capacious enough to hold without invoking the Germanic is surprising. In reality this new entity would form a hybrid of the two identities—a blithe and insincere disregard of the Germanic element in the alloy—in other words, a rather backward move.

Perhaps the boldest argument deployed is also the most eccentric, namely an insistence that there was never a “straightforward relationship between the Germanic language and a coherent cultural identity.” Yet even a passing acquaintance with St Boniface’s letters, whose evangelism revolved around Germanic kinship, suggests Germanics took their shared heritage (imagined or otherwise) seriously even at the margins of its sprachbund.

This will leave readers wondering whether the editors are correct to maintain the “absurdity” of believing early literary sources provide a window into a Germanic world, or—more credibly—that it is more ludicrous to discount numerous accounts (from Caesar and Strabo to Tacitus and Sidonius) as sheer fantasy.