The Use of Onomastics in Germanic Linguistics: The First Steps*

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THE IDEA FOR THE SUBJECT OF THIS PAPER originated in the plans for a course in Germanic Linguistics at the Linguistic Institute held in the summer of 1966. I had planned as a class project the determination of the feasibility of predicting later linguistic developments after examining and analyzing the earliest onomastic evidence of the Germanic peoples.

I had planned to distribute first a controlled sample, then bit by bit a major part of the corpus of early Germanic onomastic data. Members of the class would then subject these names to linguistic analysis and set up hypotheses for the internal classification of the Germanic languages based upon the names. The classifications thus presented would be compared with the different classificatory systems advanced for those languages comprising the Germanic branch of Indo-European.

I had hoped that, out of these exercises, would also be generated a tentative onomastic methodology, which would then serve as an operational framework for dealing with the historical and comparative linguistic use of onomastic data to predict and trace linguistic change, for periods when no additional data (or very little additional data) were available, and of predicting dialectal differences.

Clearly, although background in Germanic linguistics would be needed, unfortunately for the project, the members of the class did not have this, and, in the eight-week period of the course, little could be done in implementing what appeared then to be a grandiose dream, so it was abandoned in favor of a more traditional approach.

* This paper was read at the Annual Meeting of the *ANS* in New York, December 30, 1966, with the title "Typological and Genetic Classification of the Germanic Languages as Reflected in the Earliest Germanic Names."

However, I still hoped that it might be possible to integrate the linguistic information extracted from these earliest Germanic names with this tentative onomastic methodology, a partial goal being the determination of the function of onomastics in historical and comparative linguistics, with particular reference to the Germanic peoples and their languages.

Our first information about the Germanic peoples comes not from their own historians, but from the works of writers of classical antiquity.[1] The phrase "writers of classical antiquity" may unconsciously call to mind innumerable Roman and Greek commentators, who wrote profusely about the barbarians to the north and west of them, and who have furnished later generations with a storehouse of material about the early Germanic peoples. Such, however, was far from the case. Disregarding works that were lost even almost 2,000 years ago, what we have left are basically accounts of the wars and migrations of certain tribes, their famous men (and to a lesser degree, women), geographies of the Germanic world (usually as part of more exhaustive works), and what we would call today ethnographic surveys, frequently at second-hand of the Germanic peoples, or accounts of their customs where they differed from the Roman or Greek. Out of this miscellany, what has survived of linguistic interest are mainly words from a Germanic language for items of material culture,[2] absent in Greece or Rome, names of heroic Germanic figures, names of Germanic gods and goddesses, ethnic or tribal names and place names. This corpus is supplemented by inscriptional evidence containing, personal, divine,[3] tribal and ethnic names. What might seem *now* to be an extensive corpus

[1] A convenient list of the more important works and authors, chronologically arranged and with commentary, is found in Ernst Schwarz, *Germanische Stammeskunde* (Heidelberg, 1956), pp. 9–16.

[2] See Friedrich Kluge, *Urgermanisch*, in Pauls *Grundriß der Germanischen Philologie*, Dritte Auflage (Strassburg, 1913), II, 16–18.

[3] Literary and inscriptional onomastic evidence is alphabetically arranged, with approximate dates and citations supplied in M[oritz] Schönfeld, *Wörterbuch der Altgermanischen Personen- und Völkernamen* (Heidelberg, 1911). Divine names are collected and subjected to linguistic analysis in Siegfried Gutenbrunner, *Die germanischen Götternamen der antiken Inschriften* (Halle [Saale], 1936). Gutenbrunner (pp. 1–2, note 1) also cites the primary source for inscriptional Germanic onomastic evidence; *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum* for Germanic inferior, Germanic superior, and England.

actually contains quite a bit of duplicate onomastic evidence, as the handbooks will confirm.[4] The acquisition of the Latin alphabet, by the Germanic peoples, came centuries after the earliest non-Germanic commentators, and, of course, after considerable migrations, historical linguistic change, and dialect differentiation. The early use of the Runic alphabet, primarily in Scandinavia, was restricted in the main to brief inscriptions and not to historical comment, but these do provide us with very early North Germanic onomastic evidence.

The question is then raised, to what extent does the combined fragmentary evidence of antiquity reflect the then contemporaneous linguistic status and later linguistic developments within the Germanic languages themselves? The question in turn raises a number of subsidiary questions, among them, 1) How reliable are names themselves as a reflection of a particular language or dialect? 2) In what way do names reflect evolutionary linguistic change? 3) How reliable is the written testimony of our sources and the inscriptional evidence? 4) How are varying forms of the same name to be interpreted? 5) Since we have no choice but to assume that our evidence is fragmentary, how complete a linguistic picture can we extract from it?

Before expanding upon these questions, I would like to discuss the methodology of onomastics itself, and *its* relevance to the problem. If we accept, as we must, that the science of chemistry does not end when all the elements have been discovered and described, we must also be prepared to accept that onomastics does not end with the collection and compilation of names. Rather, such a collection of onomastic data represents a beginning, a source for further investigation – research which will use the data obtained as the basis for a deeper, perhaps more specialized approach. This means that an aggregation of names is especially valuable, not primarily of itself, but for the other-than-onomastic conclusions that may be drawn from it. Its value lies in its ability to assist fields of inquiry distinct from, yet related to, onomastics.

I mention this in particular, because there is surely no lack of collections (or at least, accessible sources) of Germanic onomastic material, and the investigation of such data is as old as Germanic

[4] Schönfeld, *passim*.

philology itself.[5] Yet this, in itself, begs the question; for Germanic philology and linguistics have altered their position regarding the traditional tripartite classification of the Germanic languages into North Germanic, East Germanic, and West Germanic. The twentieth century has seen this traditional three-fold classification so greatly modified, in favor of a number of competing classificatory systems, that it is now virtually abandoned. At the same time, the twentieth century has seen little *new* onomastic evidence added to what was available up to the first two decades. In fact, it is surprising that this three-fold system stood as long as it did, being upon examination, linguistically unsound, and geographically a misnomer. For West Germanic is *south* of North Germanic, East Germanic is *east* only of West Germanic, but *south* or *southeast* of North Germanic. Even if this geographical classification be made with reference to the "ancestral homeland" in Southern Scandinavia and Northern Germany, it is even more untenable, for after the tribal migrations had begun, their starting place loses all validity as a reference point, once it is largely, if not exclusively, abandoned.

But, since limitations of both time and subject preclude my giving the genesis and status of the various revised and amended classifications of the Germanic languages,[6] suffice it to say that the tripartite subdivision is unsound linguistically, because it implies an equivalence of each sub-group to the other two sub-groups, and also assumes a period of linguistic unity within *each* of the sub-groups: that is, a period prior to further, later division into dialects. Geographically it is a misnomer, not only for the imprecise and relative nature of this classification by points of a compass, but also because it clashes with the linguistic assumption that languages are to be classified by points of similarity between them, and not by where they happen, at a point in time, to be, or have been spoken, or where their speakers may have travelled.

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[5] See Schwarz, *Stammeskunde*, Schönfeld, and Gutenbrunner (and references therein).

[6] Recent studies dealing with this include Ernst Schwarz, *Goten, Nordgermanen, Angelsachsen* (Bern and Munich, 1951), Friedrich Maurer, *Nordgermanen und Alemannen* (Bern und Munich, 1952), and Theodore Frings, *Grundlegung einer Geschichte der deutschen Sprache* (Halle [Saale], 1952). A handy summary of recent research is found in John T. Waterman, *A History of the German Language* (Seattle and London, 1966), pp. 42–51.

To return to the questions: The reliability of onomastic evidence in reflecting the linguistic features of a particular language or dialect. If, for example, we find in the writings of a Latin author the name *Flaccitheus* as a prince of the Rugians, we may be reasonably certain that there was such a person, whose name, under the requirements of Latin orthography, was so written. We also find in the same source that he had a son named *Feletheus* (also called *Fewa*), who had a wife named *Giso*. After adding yet another name of the Rugian nobility, *Ferderuchus*, we are about at the end of Rugian onomastic evidence.[7] Tacitus locates them on the Baltic Sea, west of the Vistula, in Pomerania along with the Goths and Lemovii (or Lemonii).[8] The conclusions that may be drawn from this handful of personal names is that in the male line of the nobility personal names alliterated, a Germanic custom confirmed. The presence of cognates is also helpful. But these names are not of the *earliest* period of the existence of the Rugians, but shortly before their downfall, in the last few decades of the fifth century A.D. An additional conclusion is that Rugian onomastic data will *support* historical and archaeological evidence, as to the place of Rugians within the Germanic languages, or more precisely, within East Germanic, but the obvious lack of an extensive corpus of names, means that the names themselves cannot be used to reconstruct the phonology and morphology of the Rugian language. In fact we owe to one work, an account of the life of St. Severinus, by Eugippius, even these scanty onomastic citations.[9] But linguistic houses have been constructed out of data just as flimsy, and hardly more extensive. The Germanist Ferdinand Wrede, in 1886, wrote *Über die Sprache der Wandalen*, for which historical and archaeological data are relatively abundant, yet onomastic evidence insignificant in comparison.

When we encounter onomastic material we assume to be Germanic, we are faced with the question of the accuracy of transcription. A phonemic displacement of consonants, called the First Sound Shift, differentiated Germanic from the other Indo-European languages far back in the pre-historical and pre-literate period. This, plus a Germanic vowel shift and the internal phonemic develop-

[7] See Schwarz, *Stammeskunde*, pp. 81–82, and Schönfeld, pp. 86–87 and 110.

[8] *Germania*, Chapter 44.

[9] Schwarz, *Stammeskunde*, pp. 81–83.

ments within Latin and Greek, effectively removed Germanic from classical consciousness as a related language. Also, the Latin and Greek phonemic systems were expressed in an alphabet that was inadequate to express the German phonemic system.[10] This meant that a transcriber, be he scribe, historian, or stone-cutter, reproduced a Germanic name in terms not of the language from which it was taken, but in the symbols of his own alphabet, which in turn meant that he employed sound substitution, whereby an alphabetic symbol for a sound close to, but not identical with, the Germanic counterpart, was reflected in the Latin and Greek orthography. The problem of sound substitution makes it difficult to assess possible linguistic change. That is, is an alternate spelling the result of sound substitution or linguistic change? To this must be added a more routine observation, namely that the majority of Germanic names were inflected according to Latin and Greek declensions. There are exceptions and they provide some important written confirmation of the pre-history of the Germanic languages.[11]

Onomastic evidence can, in general, be expected to reflect evolutionary linguistic change, following the phonological and morphological development of the language. Most of the attested Germanic names are composed of two stems or themes, one or more of which will end in a full vowel. With fixing of the Germanic stress accent on the first syllable, these full vowels will be reduced, and this will be reflected in the orthography as a confusion of letters, in an attempt to reproduce in writing a changing linguistic situation.[12] However, a name may be "petrified," especially if associated with a famous person. In particular, I can mention the preservation in the OHG *Hildebrandslied* of the consciously archaic spelling *Theotrichhe* of line 19 in contrast to *Detrihhe* of line 23 and *Deotrichhe* of line 26. The person named is Theoderic, king of the Ostrogoths, called "the Great", who died in 526.

In *Tencteri* and *Hanhavaldi* (if the latter is an accurate transcription), we find two isolated examples of a retained nasal in a position where in all other cases it had been lost.[13]

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[10] See Schönfeld, pp. xvi–xxvii and Kluge, pp. 30–35.

[11] For example, the divine names *Aflims*, *Saitchamimi(s)*, and *Vatvims* probably reflect the Germanic dative (instrumental) plural ending *-miz, after syncope of *i*. See Kluge, p. 197, for citations and supporting evidence.

[12] Schönfeld, passim. (Footnote 13 on page 125)

The reliability of written evidence, excluding the possibility of later falsification, is directly linked to resolving problems inherent in transcribing a language in a foreign alphabet. Also, repetition of a name, especially if found in both Latin and Greek sources, or if inscriptional found in a number of different localities, is rather convincing of dialect diversity and/or linguistic change. Although in a period so long before the invention of printing, the more something was copied (especially if in a language different from that of the copyist), the greater the possibility of error in transmission, and thus the greater the likelihood of the preservation of a linguistically unjustified form. We are then faced with resolving the problem of whether a given form represents the language spoken at time of recording, the language as spoken at an earlier date than recording, a scribal or auditory misapprehension, or a compromise form between the foreign language and the language of the scribe. Varying forms of the same name may be interpreted in like manner. We are fortunate if a datable written source assigns the names to a given tribe or area, or if the names are of an historically verifiable person.

The starting point *par excellence* for an introduction to Germanic prehistory, ethnography, linguistics, and onomastics is the *Germania* of Tacitus (of A.D. 98), wherein in chapter two he presents what he states is the Germans' own account of their origins. Tacitus, incidentally, never visited Germany, and presumably got his information at second-hand from travellers, who gave the names of tribes located primarily on water-ways; some tribes located in areas difficult of access may not have been cited and their names and heroes and gods lost. The name *German*, in fact, may not be a Germanic name at all. Tacitus mentions it has being of "recent origin."[14]

It may be seen that the fragmentary nature of the data has often resulted in a fragmentary approach to the problem. That is, individual names become the primary subject for investigation, rather than the whole body of data being attacked as a unit. A complete linguistic picture is probably out of the question, not only because of the paucity of the data, but as the brief example from Tacitus'

[13] *Tencteri* was a Latin rendition of a Germanic tribal name reconstructed as *Þenhterōz. Latin c [k] was substituted for Germanic [h] and Latin [t] for Germanic [þ]. *Hanhavaldi* is a Burgundian personal name in the dative singular.

[14] For various interpretations of the etymological meaning of *German*, see Rudolf Much, *Die Germania des Tacitus* (Heidelberg, 1959), pp. 42–46.

Germania shows, also because of the method by which the data was collected, and also for the reasons cited earlier in this paper.

Thus it appears that we have a *relative* abundance of *incomplete* data. What I feel is required is a technique that will eliminate, or reduce as much as possible, the variables that tend to obscure the linguistic situation. A first step would be to determine what features in the data are conditioned by the orthography used to transcribe them, and rewrite the data in a transcription which will closely approximate what we reconstruct the linguistic status to be for a particular time and place. Then will occur, as necessary, further reconstructions, so that the resulting forms will represent as early a stage in Germanic linguistic pre-history as possible. When this is done, a more coherent phonological and morphological picture should be apparent, and the data then can be subject to computerized interpretation. Only then can it be integrated with early non-onomastic records from Gothic of the fourth century A.D. which is the foremost representative of East Germanic, the branch of Germanic that became extinct rather early in history, and which contains numerous archaisms. This still will present only a partial linguistic picture, but it is a step forward. I will conclude by saying that onomastic evidence, especially of pre-literate cultures, may provide a treasure trove of linguistic information, but it is used to best advantage only when a consistent methodology is applied, a methodology which assumes that the data are a beginning, not an end.

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