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Britain, Germany, and Brexit

The ‘Cradle of Democracy’ and the ‘Heart of Europe’ as Different Legacies of the Nineteenth-century Idea of the ‘Germanic’

This essay traces the uses of the idea of the ‘Germanic’ in the nineteenth-century historical narratives of German and English identity and reflects on how the two ideas of Germanic liberty and of a common Germanic European heritage were deployed to tell the (national) identity stories that still preoccupy us today: Germany as the ‘heart of Europe’ and Britain as the ‘cradle of democracy’. Today the notion of the Germanic has a rather mixed press: it tends to be seen as historically distant, somewhat old-fashioned – the term Germanic Languages has disappeared from the names for most German University Departments in the UK (less so in the U.S). It may even be considered vaguely suspect, with the whiff of white supremacy about it. Nineteenth-century thinking, however, had embraced the Germanic as modern and emancipating, an interpretation that may surprise today but that does not absolve the Germanic of notions of white supremacy (as the question is always *who* is to be emancipated).

The following explores the common origin of German and British interest in the Germanic and its slightly different interpretations in each country, which, in the nineteenth century, were firmly rooted in the belief that the Germanic was an inheritance shared by both nations. While for nineteenth-century English and German contemporaries this commonality was self-evident, to the late twentieth- and twenty-first observer, it tends to come as a surprise, having fallen victim to two world wars and to the interpretation of political and intellectual history that dominated after them. However, as we shall see, the public discussions around Brexit, the UK’s departure from the European Union in 2019 following a referendum in 2016, relied heavily on nineteenth-century narratives of an English identity based on Germanic traits, while the official German willingness to support European integration, notwithstanding German Euroscepticism, appears to continue the nineteenth-century narrative of German lands as the crucible of European identity in which the Germanic legacy is a key part. Nineteenth-century notions of the Germanic have left their mark on both of narratives.

This reliance on nineteenth-century discourses in contemporary concepts of Anglo-British and German identities tends to be covert but sits well with the two common metaphors cited in the title of this essay: the cradle of democracy for

England (or Britain) and the heart of Europe for Germany. While the former is often also applied to Athens as the origin of ‘democracy’ in classical antiquity, it is in regular use to refer to democratic traditions in the UK, sometimes with a sense of loss or decline.¹ While ‘heart of Europe’ is contested among central European nations,² it is frequently related to Germany. Even if the phrase’s geographical dimension often produces references to being a place *in* or *at* the heart of Europe, the implication always points beyond a geographical location towards a place *in the concept* of Europe.³

1 Cf. “There was a time when the UK was regarded globally as the ‘Cradle of Democracy’ and there is no reason why it could not reclaim this title”. *St. Andrew’s Economist*, Kieran Fowlds, 8 Oct 2021, accessed 19 May 22 (as were all of below); <https://thestandrewseconomistdotcom.wordpress.com/2021/10/08/can-the-uk-be-the-cradle-of-democracy-once-again/>, or Richard Seymour, “Cradle of Democracy? Westminster is seen by many as an occupying power” *Guardian*, 29 September 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/sep/29/westminster-cradle-of-democracy-occupying-power-ukip>; in the negative sense see “No Cradle of Democracy” Letter to *The Socialist Worker* published on 1 October 2002 regarding Anglo-US preparations for the invasion of Iraq: <https://socialistworker.co.uk/socialist-review-archive/no-cradle-democracy/>.

2 See for example, Belgium: <https://www.studyinbelgium.be/en/belgium-ideal-position-right-heart-europe>; Czechia: see Robert B. Pynsent, “‘The Heart of Europe’: The origins and fate of a Czech national cliché”, *Central Europe*, 11:1 (2013): 1–23; Poland: see Norman Davies, *The Heart of Europe: the Past in Poland’s Present* (Oxford: OUP, 1984).

3 See the official website of Germany’s tenure of the EU Council presidency in 2020, which suggests that Germany’s geographical position is the natural corollary to its commitment to European integration, <https://www.eu2020.de/eu2020-en/presidency/germany-history-background-eucouncilpresidency-laender/2361346>. Alexander Dobrindt in the *Bundestag* on 22 January 2018 on the 50th anniversary of the Élysée Contracts between (originally West-)Germany and France: “Deutschland und Frankreich sind das pulsierende Herz Europas, und der Élysée-Vertrag ist die Herzkammer unserer Freundschaft.” Alexander Dobrindt: “Der Élysée-Vertrag ist die Herzkammer unserer Freundschaft”, <https://www.eu2020.de/eu2020-en/presidency/germany-history-background-eucouncilpresidency-laender/2361346>. U. S. President George W. Bush referred to Germany as the “heart of Europe” during his Germany visit on 24 February 2005, <https://www.tagesspiegel.de/politik/bush-deutschland-ist-das-herz-europas/587694.html>; see also the presentation of Germany in a brochure of the German *Agentur für Arbeit* addressed to international workers, entitled *Deutschland. Mitten drin. Leben und Arbeiten im Herzen Europas*, <https://polen.diplo.de/blob/485774/3144950d551aa6c317689034047f2b73/leben-und-arbeiten-data.pdf>.

1 The Germanic

How did the modern idea of ‘the Germanic’ emerge and what did it stand for in the nineteenth century? It was an umbrella term for a vague yet powerful cultural identity that was, from the outset, entirely constructed, in Benedict Anderson’s sense.⁴ This is not to suggest that it is a chimeric falsehood ‘created’ out of ignorance or to deceive. It should be seen as an idea that made sense because it reflected contemporary cultural needs and social ambitions, an idea which acquired traction exactly because it was convincing and relevant.⁵ Despite its cultural imprecision the term eventually acquired a scientific precision that turned it into a philological and ethnological technical term. But this is not how it started.

The term Germanic is derived from the Latin *germanus*, as used by Tacitus in his second-century *De Germania* to describe Northern (non-Roman) warriors who impressed the Romans with their fierce interpersonal loyalty in combat, fighting like ‘brothers’, and their culture of freedom and independence.⁶ Tacitus uses this characterisation to criticise Roman decadence. The term (re-)emerges in early modern discourses with the rediscovery of Tacitus’ work by early modern Humanists, in the context of identifying an indigenous Northern origin of European peoples.⁷ Interest in Tacitus’ *Germania* coincides with interest in Jordanes’ sixth-century history of the ‘Goths’. From the beginning the term was ethnically vague and culturally inclusive. This explains why in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century German(ic) was only one of several terms used to describe the same cultural identity, ‘Gothic’ was another.

Love of freedom coupled with personal loyalty and integrity were considered key features of peoples who, in the eighteenth century, were sometimes described as German/Germaine, or Teutonic (Percy), but more frequently as Gothic (Hurd), or simply as ‘Northern’. The label of Northern could include the Celts (Mallet), and sometimes even Slavic peoples. In the nineteenth century, German (Scott and Thomas Arnold) or Teutonic (Kingsley) were used in English. In Ger-

⁴ Maike Oergel, *Zeitgeist. How Ideas Travel. Politics, Culture and the Public in the Age of Revolution* (Berlin and New York: de Gruyter, 2019), pp. 241–246.

⁵ Oergel, *Zeitgeist*, p. 244.

⁶ Lat. *germanus* = brother, of the same type/blood, closely related (germaine).

⁷ See Samuel Klinger, “The Goths in England: An Introduction to the Gothic Vogue in the Eighteenth-century Aesthetic Tradition”, *Modern Philology*, 43:2 (1945): 107–117; Christina Lee and Nicola McLelland (eds.), *Germania Remembered 1500–2009: Commemorating and Inventing a Germanic Past* (Tempe, AZ: ACMRS, 2012), Foreword and Introduction; Oergel, *Zeitgeist*, pp. 247–250.

man, *deutsch* (A. W. Schlegel) and increasingly *germanisch* (A. W. Schlegel, Fichte, Hegel) tended to be used to describe this identity.⁸

Thomas Percy's influential (and heavily edited) translation of Paul Henri Mallet's *L'histoire de Dannemarc: L'introduction à l'histoire de Dannemarc où l'on traite de la religion, des moeurs, des loix et des usages des anciens Danois* (1755) illustrates this inclusive vagueness. It is already signalled Percy's title: he renders Mallet's reference to Denmark as *Northern Antiquities: or A Description of the Manners, Customs, Religion and Laws of the Ancient Danes*, adding, *And other Northern Nations, including our own Anglo-Saxon Ancestors* (1770). In his dedication, Percy invites his patron, the Duke of Northumberland, "to trace [in this book], to their source, the peculiarities of character, manners, and government which so remarkably distinguish the Teutonic nations" and suggests that the Duke himself descends from such Germanic ancestors, via his "Norman" forebears, those "Northern Chiefs" who settled in France.⁹ In Percy's lengthy preface the most frequent descriptor is "gothic", which he takes to be synonymous with Teutonic, as in "the Gothic or Teutonic languages".¹⁰ In *Northern Antiquities*, Percy is keen to distinguish between "Teutonic and Celtic peoples" (Table of Contents), or "Gothic and Celtic nations", which Mallet, erroneously, failed to do.¹¹ Five years earlier, however, in his seminal "Essay on the Ancient Minstrel in England", which appeared in his influential ballad collection *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (1765), Percy had been keen to *link* Celtic and Teutonic-Gothic cultures by suggesting a close cultural connection between the nature and social roles of "scalds" and "bards". "[They] were revered, from the earliest ages, among the people of Gaul, Britain and Ireland, and the North; and indeed by almost all in-

8 "Got(h)isch" was also in use in German. Cf. the anonymous article "Über die sogenannte Gothische Baukunst" in the *Neue Lausizische Monatsschrift* (1800), which explains the rationale for this new word and its synonyms: "Gewölbe mit Rippen – *more teutonico* oder gothisch, weil die Römer alles, was über den Alpen war, gothisch nannten" (6 vols. in 1, pp. 350–367, here: 361). In his early essay "Von deutscher Baukunst" (1772) Goethe wanted to see "gothisch" replaced by "deutsch" when it came to describing medieval architecture (such as the Strassburg Minster), as he considered "gothisch" anachronistic and giving a "verkleinert" idea of achievement. In Herder, Goethe, Frisi, Möser, *Von deutscher Art und Kunst. Einige fliegende Blätter*, ed. by Hans Dietrich Irmscher (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1988), pp. 93–104, here p. 101). Ironically, in German "got(h)isch" remained linked to architecture, or refers specifically to the Gothic people.

9 *Northern Antiquities: or a Description of the Manners, Customs, Religion and Laws of the Ancient Danes and other Northern Nations including those of our own Anglo-Saxon Ancestors*, translated from Mallet's *L'histoire de Dannemarc* [by Thomas Percy], 2 vols. (London: Carnan, 1770), vol. I, p. n. p.

10 *Northern Antiquities*, p. xxxiv; my italics.

11 *Northern Antiquities*, "Translator's Preface".

habitants of Europe, whether of Celtic or Gothic race, but by none more than our own Teutonic ancestors".¹² At the time, the figure of the bard, as poet-philosopher-legislator, was becoming a cultural icon; their cultural significance lay in the ancient 'original' cultural unity they represented.¹³ Percy occasionally uses the term Germanic in *Northern Antiquities*, on one occasion adding it for "clarification". When discussing the original population of Scandinavia, he translates Mallet's "Scythes ou Celtes d'origine"¹⁴ as "of Germanic origin, Cimbri or Teutones".¹⁵ Mallet used both *germaine* and *gothique*. Richard Hurd, also writing the early 1760s, and of whom more below, predominantly used "Gothic" to describe Northern peoples.

What united 'Dark Age' Germanic, Celtic, and perhaps even Slavic peoples in the understanding of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century contemporaries was their peripheral status during the period of classical antiquity, their emergence from the periphery towards the end of the Roman Empire, their martial culture that relied on honour, courage and liberty, and their gradual but eventually very firm acceptance of Christianity. One of the most succinct summaries of this view comes from August Wilhelm Schlegel, albeit with a focus on the Germanic, in his lectures on *Dramatische Kunst und Literatur* (1808): "Nächst dem Christentum ist die Bildung Europas seit dem Anfang des Mittelalters durch die germanische Stammart der nordischen Eroberer [...] entschieden worden."¹⁶ A few years earlier, in his lectures on *Geschichte der Romantischen Literatur* (1802/03), he had expressed the same with slightly different terminology: "Deutsche Stämme waren es, welche durch den Umsturz des abendländischen Römischen Reiches im Süden, dann durch Ausbreitung im Norden das neuere Europa gründeten und erfüllten."¹⁷ He continues:

¹² Thomas Percy, *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry*, 4th ed., 3 vols. (London: Rivington, 1794), vol. I, p. xxii.

¹³ See Maïke Oergel, "The Bard as Original and Future Poet. The Dialectic of Modernity in English and German Literary Thought around 1800", in *In the Embrace of the Swan. Anglo-German Mythologies in Literature, the Visual Arts and Cultural Theory*, ed. by Rüdiger Görner and Angus Nicholls (Berlin and New York: de Gruyter, 2012), pp. 260–280.

¹⁴ Paul Henri Mallet, *L'histoire de Dannemarc: L'introduction à l'histoire de Dannemarc où l'on traite de la religion, des moeurs, des loix et des usages des anciens Danois* (Copenhagen: n. pub., 1755), p. 24.

¹⁵ *Northern Antiquities*, p. 38. The terminological openness at the time is clearly visible in both Mallet's and Percy's usage of the terms.

¹⁶ August Wilhelm Schlegel, *Vorlesungen über dramatische Kunst und Literatur*, ed. by Giovanni Vitorio Amoretti, 2 vols. in 1, (Leipzig: Schröder, 1923), p. 11.

¹⁷ August Wilhelm Schlegel, *Geschichte der romantischen Literatur (Kritische Schriften und Briefe*, vol. 4), ed. by Edgar Lohner (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1965), p. 21.

So [...] bewährt sich das Christentum demnach als Grundprinzip der Einheit Europas; das andere Element war die deutsche Stammesart. Aus diesem beidem zusammen mit den Trümmern des klassischen Altertums muß die neuere Geschichte konstruiert werden. [...] Aus der Kombination der kernigen und redlichen Tapferkeit des deutschen Nordens mit dem Christentum [...] ging der ritterliche Geist hervor, eine glänzende, [...] in der Geschichte bisher beispieldlose Erscheinung.¹⁸

In the above, from his lecture “Über das Mittelalter”, which unlike the rest was published quickly, in 1812,¹⁹ Schlegel establishes medieval chivalry as the foundational cultural achievement of post-classical Europe, as the signature culture of the “moderns”. One of the three key elements of European culture and identity is the Germanic, “germanische/deutsche Stammesart”. The change in wording shows the uncertainty of terminology, or its rapid evolution. August Wilhelm’s brother Friedrich reiterated these points in his *Geschichte der alten und neuen Literatur* (1815), which appeared in English in 1818.²⁰

In the eighteenth century this ‘Northern’ identity was set in contrast not so much to a contemporary European South as to classical antiquity. It is part of the contrast between ancient and modern, which, in the Quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns, combined historical distance with cultural difference and eventually established the moderns not just as different from the ancients but as their historical successors. Richard Hurd suggested this in his *Letters on Chivalry and Romance* (1762), which sought to establish cultural similarity (and hence equality) between the early days of classical antiquity and medieval Europe: the crusades were equivalent the Trojan Wars. Hurd pointed out that early modern European literature, especially Spenser, Milton and Tasso, was deeply influenced by medieval Romance, which has chivalry as one of its key topics. His *Letters* are an apologia for ‘Gothic manners’. Hurd, too, suggests an (albeit distant) Germanic origin for chivalry: “Not but the origin of this refined gallantry was laid in the antient manners of the German nations.”²¹ These “antient manners” had been

18 Schlegel, *Dramatische Kunst*, pp. 82f.

19 See Roger Paulin, *The Life of August Wilhelm Schlegel. Cosmopolitan of Art and Poetry* (Cambridge: Open Book Publishing, 2016), p. 205. It was published in Friedrich Schlegel’s *Deutsches Museum*, vol. 2 (Vienna: Camesianische Buchhandlung, 1812), pp. 432–462. The complete lecture series was only published posthumously in 1887, edited by Jakob Minor as part of Schlegel’s *Vorlesungen über schöne Literatur und Kunst* (Heilbronn: Henninger, 1887).

20 Friedrich Schlegel, *Lectures on the History of Literature, Ancient and Modern. Translated from the German* [by John G. Lockhart], 2 vols., (Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1818). Friedrich seems uncertain about terminology, opting for synonymy and speaking of “deutsch oder germanisch”. Friedrich Schlegel, *Geschichte der alten und neuen Literatur* (Berlin: Simion, 1841), p. 333.

21 Richard Hurd, *Letters on Chivalry and Romance* (London: Millar, and Cambridge: Thurlbourn and Woodyer, 1762), p. 19.

ameliorated by Christianity: “Faith” was one of “the two most essential qualities of the Knight”, the other was “Courage”.²² “Prowess, Generosity, Gallantry, and Religion [...] were the peculiar and vaunted characteristics of the purer ages of chivalry”.²³ For Hurd, chivalry is the result of military bravery, the feudal order, and the (Christian) religion, and it informs post-classical European culture.

In his *Essay on Chivalry* (1818), written for inclusion in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Walter Scott reiterates these points but suggests that *both* rudimentary chivalry *and* spiritual devotion and purity (i. e. Christian traits) originated with the ancient Germanics.

The seeds of that singular institution existed in the German forests, though they did not come to maturity until the destruction of the Roman empire and the establishment of the modern states of Europe on its ruins. [...] The ancient customs of the Gothic tribes may be traced in the history of Chivalry.²⁴

Scott asserts “that high and reverential devotion to the female sex, which forms the strongest tint in the manners of Chivalry” is “derived from the Gothic tribes”.²⁵ In fact, the “spirit of devotion which the rules of Chivalry inculcate” and with which medieval knights not only “worshipped the fair sex” but “which they [also] offered to Heaven” derived from the “honour paid to chastity and purity in the German forests”. It had been “transferred as a point of sacred duty to the sons of Chivalry”.²⁶ For Scott, too, the legacy of chivalry is still evident in contemporary culture, “its effects may still be traced in European manners”.²⁷

While Scott may have gleaned much from Hurd, he is likely to have drawn on both Schlegels. His library at Abbotsford contains the English translation of Friedrich Schlegel’s *Geschichte der alten und neuen Literatur* (1818) and both the French and English translations of August Wilhelm’s *Dramatische Kunst und Literatur* (1814 and 1815 respectively).²⁸ The English translator of the former was

²² Hurd, *Chivalry and Romance*, p. 21.

²³ Hurd, *Chivalry and Romance*, p. 22.

²⁴ Walter Scott, *Essays on Chivalry, Romance and the Drama (Miscellaneous Prose Works VI)*, (Edinburgh: Cadell, and London: Whitaker, 1834), p. 9.

²⁵ Scott, *Chivalry*, p. 40.

²⁶ Scott, *Chivalry*, p. 116.

²⁷ Scott, *Chivalry*, p. 3.

²⁸ *Catalogue of the Library at Abbotsford, compiled by John George Cochrane* (Edinburgh: Constable, 1838), pp. 40, 200. The *Catalogue* also records a copy of Hurd’s *Letters on Chivalry and Romance* (appended to his *Moral and Political Dialogues*), p. 191. For conceptual and semantic overlap between A. W. Schlegel’s *Dramatische Kunst und Literatur* and Scott’s *Essay on Chivalry*, see Maïke Oergel, “‘Germanisierung’ als romantisches Kulturmuster in der englischen Ge-

Scott's son-in-law John Lockhart. Looking at the publication dates, Scott was drawing on the most recent scholarship on this topic for his Encyclopaedia essay.

By the middle of the century, in 1842, Thomas Arnold deploys these ideas in his inaugural lecture as Regius Professor of Modern History at Oxford to suggest, in Hegelian fashion, that history had a telos and that the English had a key role in bringing it to a conclusion because they were Germanic.²⁹ Noting that “our English race is the German race”,³⁰ he describes this German(ic)-ness as highly dynamic; it was the catalyst for modernity.

Our Norman fathers learnt to speak a stranger's language [French], yet in blood, as we know, they were the Saxon's brethren: both alike belong to the Teutonic or German stock. The importance of this stock is plain from this, that its admixture with the Keltic [sic] and the roman races at the fall of the western empire has changed the whole face of Europe. [...] If we consider the roman empire in the fourth century [...], we shall find in it Christianity [the perfection of moral and spiritual truth that Greece and Rome could not furnish, p. 29], [...] all the intellectual treasures of Greece, all the social and political wisdom of Rome. What is not there was simply the German race, and the peculiar qualities that characterize it. This one addition was of such power, that it changed the character of the whole mass: the peculiar stamp of the Middle Ages is wholly German.³¹

Arnold takes German and Teutonic to be synonymous and Europe to be broadly Germanic.³² The heartland of this European race and culture covers “more or less the whole west of Europe, from the head of the Gulf of Boethia to [...] Sicily, from the Oder to the Adriatic to the Hebrides and to Lisbon”.³³ Although Arnold concedes some continuing linguistic hybridity, this Germanic Europe seems to have absorbed the (Romanised) Celts.

The language spoken over a large portion of this space is not predominantly German; but even in France and Italy and Spain, the influence of the Franks, Burgundians, Visigoths, Ostrogoths and Lombards, while it has coloured even the language, has in blood and institution left its mark indelibly and legibly. Germany, the Low Countries, Switzerland for the

schichtsschreibung des 19. Jahrhunderts”, in *Praxis und Diskurs der Romantik 1800–1900*, ed. by Norman Kasper and Jochen Strobel (Paderborn: Schönigh, 2016), pp. 99–116, here pp. 109f.

²⁹ “Modern history appears to be [...] *the* last step; it appears to bear the marks of the fulness of time, as if there would be no future history beyond it.” Thomas Arnold, *Introductory Lectures on Modern History*, 3rd ed. (London: Fellows, 1845), p. 28.

³⁰ Arnold, *Modern History*, p. 26.

³¹ Arnold, *Modern History*, pp. 26f.

³² See Arnold, *Modern History*, p. 27: “The German element [...] still preserves its force.”

³³ Arnold, *Modern History*, p. 27.

most part, Denmark, Norway, and Sweden, and our own islands, are all in language, in blood, and in institutions, German most decidedly.³⁴

According to Arnold, this influence had become global.

All South America is peopled with Spaniards and Portuguese, all North America and Australia with Englishmen. I say nothing of the prospects and influence of the German race in Africa and in India: – it is enough to say that half of Europe, and all of America and Australia, are German more or less completely, in language, or in institution, or in all.³⁵

Ethnically and linguistically, there may exist some hybridity in the modern North as it was imagined in the nineteenth century, but culturally this Northern identity comes from one mould: Northern European tribes, who developed or lived by an early code of chivalry, took on Christianity and inherited (some of) the culture of antiquity; all of this they turned into medieval chivalry and Christian culture, from which a distinctly modern European culture and identity developed. This equation, in which ‘ancient Northern culture’ plus ‘Christianity’ equals ‘the modern European world’, with medieval chivalry as its foundational culture, became a mantra that dominated much of nineteenth-century identity construction.

The diversity of terms across English and German – some arising from eighteenth-century vagueness, some from false-friend cognates in English and German, Scott’s and Arnold’s ‘German’ should be read as ‘Germanic’ – has led to a terminological confusion that easily gives rise to misinterpretations and misunderstandings in later nineteenth-, twentieth- and twenty-first century readings.³⁶ At the same time, in the context of eighteenth-century ‘culture wars’ – i. e. the *Querelle* and the developing modern national identities – there was rivalry *within* this Northern identity from the start. Percy, for example, was ambiguous about the Celts. They were fellow Northerners on the one hand, but obscurantist religious bigots when they are Irish Catholics on the other.³⁷ Fichte and Hegel declared the linguistic differences between Romanised and non-Romanised Germanics as highly significant, something Arnold (above) tones down, while Charles Kingsley and William Stubbs stress the superiority of English (non-Romanised) Germanics over all the rest (as we shall see).

Yet the idea of the *common* North remained powerful: the eighteenth-century Germano-Gothic-Celtic amalgamation of an ancient Northern culture found one

³⁴ Arnold, *Modern History*, pp. 27f.

³⁵ Arnold, *Modern History*, p. 28.

³⁶ Oergel, *Zeigeist*, pp. 246f.

³⁷ See Oergel, *Zeitgeist*, p. 254, n. 15, 16. He also distinguished between them on linguistic grounds.

of its clearest expressions in the European reach of the Ossian-phenomenon, with its equally strong resonance in Britain, England, and Germany. Although initially largely intended to support Scottish nationalism and Gaelic identity,³⁸ it appealed to many readers in a wide range of European lands as precisely a new alternative antiquity to the classical option, an alternative antiquity that could give post-classical, broadly European culture its foundational period and its storehouse of mythic cultural materials. In Herder's *Ossianbriefe* (1773) and Goethe's *Werther* (1774), the bard Ossian appears as the historically modern and culturally Northern equivalent to the historically and culturally ancient Grecian Homer. Along the same lines it became possible for Alfred Tennyson to make Arthur, arguably the Celtic king of French medieval romance, the hero of his mid nineteenth-century (national) epic of Englishness, the Arthurian *Idylls of the King*, drawing on Celtic sources that had been medievalised in twelfth- and thirteenth-century France, to embody (Germanic) Englishness in Arthur. Tennyson *could* have chosen the thoroughly Germanic Alfred the Great. But Arthur fits the cultural bill perfectly: he is a medieval(ised) knight who fights in England for an ideal of justice and freedom. His Celtic origins are dwarfed by his identity as a chivalrous knight and king who supports, at least in principle, a voluntary egalitarian meritocracy based on personal integrity, trust, and public spirit – symbolised in his Round Table.³⁹

This close association of the Celtic and Germanic under one cultural identity of the 'North' (there has always been more fence-sitting regarding the Slavs) is today often deemed an error, committed out of ignorance or the desire to culturally appropriate. Both is true. Importantly for the cultural historian, however, *at the time* this amalgamation made sense because it served an agenda of emancipation: this Northern identity was initially developed to be set against the superiority of classical antiquity and contemporary neo-classicism. In the first instance, a 'Northern antiquity' represented a vindication of (Northern) Europe in relation to classical antiquity and an attempt to emancipate post-classical culture from dominant neo-classicism and replace the latter with a kind of Romantic classicism, in which even Homer, Alexander Pope's "prince of poets", becomes an inspired "bard" and the medieval crusades, as far as poetic inspiration was concerned, equivalent to the Trojan Wars.

What does this (emancipatory) identity stand for? In short, two things: liberty and personal integrity.

³⁸ See Oergel, *Zeitgeist*, p. 258, n. 21.

³⁹ See Maïke Oergel, *The Return of the King Arthur and the Nibelungen. National Myth in 19th-century English and German Literature* (Berlin and New York: de Gruyter, 1998).

2 Liberty and Personal Integrity

Thomas Arnold's assessment gives a clue: apart from their 'blood', the Germanics bring, and leave behind, their 'institutions', and these institutions are related to their commitment to liberty, to freedom. Nineteenth-century historians linked this love of freedom to the establishment of participatory politics, non-despotic government in Montesquieu's terms, to the development of parliament, and eventually to democratic political structures. As Charles Kingsley put it in the 1860s, "Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian laws all formed on the same primaeval model [...] liberty and self-government [were] common to all the race."⁴⁰

Non-despotic political institutions were also linked to Germanic origins in German discourse. In his *Reden an die deutsche Nation* (1807/08), public lectures given in Berlin in the context of Napoleon's hegemony, Fichte identifies the "Germanier" as "ursprünglich ein Grundstamm" whose purpose it was "die im alten Europa errichtete gesellschaftliche Ordnung mit der in Asien aufgewahrten wahren Religion zu vereinigen".⁴¹ Those *Germanier* who had kept their language (and with that the storehouse of their culture and history) i. e. those who now spoke West and North Germanic languages (German, Dutch, English or Scandinavian languages), had also kept "germanische Ursitte" politically: "ein Staatenbund unter beschränktem Oberhaupt" (a confederation under a head with limited powers), while those settling in former Roman territories had gradually adopted centralised and monarchic systems. For Fichte, Germanic political "Ursitte" was *not* absolutism and despotism, but the opposite.⁴² For evidence Fichte points to the institutions and government of the independent imperial cities of the German Reich.

Es entstanden [...] indessen Städte, die durch Glieder aus dem Volke errichtet wurden. [...] In ihnen entstanden [...] treffliche bürgerliche Verfassungen, und Einrichtungen. [...] Die deutsche Nation ist die einzige unter den neu-europäischen Nationen, die es an ihrem Bürgerstande schon durch die Tat gezeigt hat, daß sie die republikanische Verfassung zu ertragen vermöge.⁴³

⁴⁰ Charles Kingsley, *The Roman and the Teuton. A Series of Lectures given before the University of Cambridge* (London: Macmillan, 1913), p. 245.

⁴¹ Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *Reden an die deutsche Nation*, vol. 7 of *Fichtes Werke*, ed. by Immanuel Fichte (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1971), pp. 311f. (photographic reprint of *Fichtes Sämtliche Werke* (Berlin: Veit, 1845/46).

⁴² Fichte, *Reden*, p. 313.

⁴³ Fichte, *Reden*, p. 357.

Fichte, who had continued to defend the political aims of the revolution in France into 1793, suggests he wants republican structures introduced (or rather, restored) in Germany.

In *Romantische Literatur*, A. W. Schlegel noted that the “German constitution” (referring to the *Reichsverfassung*) was the “last remnant of the Middle Ages”, simple and based on “kräftigen Freiheitssinn”.⁴⁴ He had given this a political slant by suggesting that “Europa [ist] im Mittelalter wirklich *ein* Land gewesen”,⁴⁵ united by a shared cultural heritage and a common *patriotic* interest: “durch große Übereinstimmung in der Denkart, den Sitten und Gesinnungen” and a “Gefühl eines gemeinsamen Interesses, einen wahrhaft europäischen Patriotismus”.⁴⁶ Patriotism had been a politically loaded term in contemporary debates about new (national) collectives since the mid-eighteenth century. It tended to be seen as underpinning an inclusive social project characterised by non-absolutist, non-despotic government and linked to communal sovereignty, i. e. the liberty of the social collective. Albeit obliquely, Schlegel suggests that Germanic political heritage is based on political liberty.

Fichte too stresses the sense of community, of public spirit, in those “bürgerlich-republikanisch” cities, which resulted from a spirit of “Frömmigkeit, Ehrbarkeit, der Bescheidenheit und des Gemeinsinns”. “Für sich selbst bedurften sie wenig, für öffentliche Unternehmungen machten sie unermesslichen Aufwand. [...] alle [waren] gleichen Sinnes und gleicher Aufopferung für das Gemeinsame”.⁴⁷

Hegel’s philosophy of history was concerned with investigating the realisation (Bewusstwerdung) of freedom in history and society.⁴⁸ “Die Weltgeschichte ist nichts als die Entwicklung des Begriffes der Freiheit”,⁴⁹ in which the Germanier had a particular role, “der germanische Geist ist der Geist der neuen Welt”, they were the “Träger des christlichen Prinzips” and would “den Begriff der wahrhaften Freiheit nicht nur zur religiösen Substanz [...] haben, sondern auch in der Welt aus dem subjektiven Selbstbewußtsein frei [...] produzieren”.⁵⁰ Their im-

44 Schlegel, *Romantische Literatur*, p. 38. He also considered it a relic (“sich selbst überlebt”, *ibid.*). It would indeed soon be abolished when the Holy German Empire collapsed in 1806.

45 Schlegel, *Romantische Literatur*, p. 22; italics original.

46 Schlegel, *Romantische Literatur*, p. 22.

47 Fichte, *Reden*, p. 356.

48 See Stephen Houlgate, *Freedom, Truth and History. An Introduction to Hegel’s Philosophy* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), pp. 77–84.

49 G. W. F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte*, vol. 12 of *Werke*, ed. by Karl Markus Michel and Eva Moldenhauer (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1992), pp. 539f.

50 Hegel, *Philosophie der Geschichte*, p. 413.

mature pre-Christian nature (independent will and subjective freedom) formed a fruitful (dialectical) connection with Christianity. But the German(ic)s' love of freedom was quite concrete:

Die alten Deutschen sind berühmt durch ihre Freiheitsliebe [...]. Dieses Element der Freiheit, indem es zu einem gesellschaftlichen Verhältnis übergeht, kann nichts setzen als Volksgemeinden, so daß diese Gemeinden das Ganze ausmachen und jedes Mitglied der Gemeinde als solches ein freier Mann ist. [...] Die Gemeinde oder ihr Vorstand mit Zuziehung von Gemeindemitgliedern richtete in Angelegenheiten des Privatrechts zur Sicherheit der Person und des Eigentums. Für allgemeine Angelegenheiten, Kriege und dergleichen waren gemeinsame Beratschlagungen und Beschlüsse erforderlich.⁵¹

For Fichte and Hegel realising freedom is both an intellectual and a political project. Fichte speaks of the task “Vernunft in Freiheit zu realisieren”. Hegel opens the section on the “Germanische Welt” with the following: “Der germanische Geist ist der Geist der neuen [modern] Welt, deren Zweck die Realisierung der absoluten Wahrheit als der unendlichen Selbstbestimmung der Freiheit ist, der Freiheit, die ihre absolute Form selbst zum Inhalte hat.”⁵² This intellectual project would ultimately be reflected in political and social organisations: freedom was to be realised philosophically and politically. For both Fichte und Hegel, as Protestants, the Reformation was a significant step towards preparing the ground for political reform, a step that had not been taken in France. In their view this was the key reason why the French Revolution had failed by first deteriorating into violence, and then, with Napoleon, into military territorial (imperialist) expansion.⁵³

A sense of honour linked to honesty and loyalty is key to this Germanic identity. A. W. Schlegel speaks of “strengere Sittlichkeit und biedere Redlichkeit” among the Germanic [than the Romans].⁵⁴ Hegel refers to their original, rudimentary love of freedom *and* an original Germanic commitment to “Treue”.⁵⁵ Scott tells his readers that, while present in rudimentary form in pre-Christian Germanic culture, the ancient “spirit of devotion” and the “honour paid to chastity and purity” were refined and strengthened by Christianity. The idea that, as an ethos, these traits should be cherished, and revived, was encapsulated in the concept of the nineteenth-century ‘Christian gentleman’ (eventually the *English gentleman*), formulated by Kenelm Henry Digby in his *Rules for the Gentlemen of Eng-*

⁵¹ Hegel, *Philosophie der Geschichte*, p. 425.

⁵² Hegel, *Philosophie der Geschichte*, p. 413.

⁵³ See Fichte, *Reden*: 6. Rede, pp. 344–358; Hegel, *Philosophie der Geschichte*, p. 535.

⁵⁴ Schlegel, *Romantische Literatur*, p. 39.

⁵⁵ Hegel, *Philosophie der Geschichte*, p. 425.

land or The Broad Stone of Honour (1822). The book was named after the ruins of the castle of Ehrenbreitstein on the Rhine near Koblenz, Digby's favourite on his extensive travels on the continent. *The Broad Stone of Honour* was an immediate bestseller and became a nineteenth-century classic. After two editions in two years, Digby produced an extended and re-written version in the late 1820s.⁵⁶ The book promotes ideals of truthfulness, honour, valour and, crucially, public service; it rails against "refined selfishness", the current "degeneracy of mind, united with ambition"⁵⁷ and wants to make educated young men ("the youth of gentle breeding") "ever mindful of their duties".⁵⁸ Digby bases the legitimacy of his code on its indigenoussness, on its origins in the common traditions of European medieval culture.

We date the origin of our order from the early institutions which took place in Europe after the Christian Religion had been generally received: and it is therefore in the principles of ancient chivalry, in the characters of the knights and barons of the middle ages that we must look for the virtues and sentiments that are to be our inheritance.⁵⁹

Although this ethos instils a strong sense of duty, it is still linked personal freedom: the commitment to serve (to do one's duty) is freely made, the bond is not that of a slave. The commitment's reliability and permanence are guaranteed by honour and loyalty, it is sealed by words, not enforced by chains (real or contractual). These ideas are derived from the concepts of chivalry that surfaced in late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century thinking and were underpinned the modern medievalism. The "knight" was bound to his loyalty and duty by honour, his "devotion" as Hurd and Scott had put it. "Aus der Kombination der kernigen und *redlichen* Tapferkeit des deutschen Nordens mit dem Christentum [...] ging der ritterliche Geist hervor", ran A. W. Schlegel's version; their "strengere Sittlichkeit und biedere Redlichkeit" distinguished them from the Romans. "Redlich" blends qualities associated with personal integrity: honesty, honour, fairness, reliability, and uprightness. Among knights, there is an equality of free equals, they are peers, which is why King Arthur's *Round Table* was so attractive. The notion of Germanic straight-talking, upstanding honesty is summed up by

⁵⁶ Kenelm Henry Digby, *The Broad Stone of Honour, or, Rules for the Gentlemen of England*, 2nd ed. (London: Rivington, 1823). This was followed by *The Broad Stone of Honour or the True Sense and Practice of Chivalry*, 4 vols. (London: Joseph Booker, 1826–1829).

⁵⁷ Digby, *Broad Stone of Honour*, p. 32.

⁵⁸ Digby, *Broad Stone of Honour*, p. x.

⁵⁹ Digby, *Broad Stone of Honour*, p. 31.

“Cedric the Saxon” in Scott’s *Ivanhoe* (1819). “I will die a Saxon – true in word and open in deed.”⁶⁰

3 The Germanic in (political) action

The ‘mantra’ of the modern Germanic had acquired some concrete contemporary significance: its two (or three) key ingredients, Germanic/Northern descent and Christianity (plus some classical legacy) combined to produce the medieval world and its signature culture, medieval chivalry. This culture is based on a love of liberty and a commitment to personal integrity and the Middle Ages are the foundational period of post-classical European history and culture, and as such the basis of modernity. Liberty and integrity are defined as the basis of both good government, which includes an element of social participation and power-sharing, and a just civil (bürgerlich) society. According to this narrative, the history of Europe, or the history of the Northern peoples, is that of (a) “free people(s)”, or, in nineteenth-century terms, of free, honourable and responsible men. By the 1830s, this medieval-Northern identity and its narrative were pervasive in Germany and Britain and, with amendments to the specifics of ‘descent’, became part of the self-definition of modern national identities of most modern European nations.

This is a useful, hence successful, identity because it is flexible and timely. On the one hand it is open and inclusive (to some extent), on the other it has the potential to be exclusive and form the basis for competing identities. Socio-politically, it becomes attractive to the middle classes, in the very broadest sense: it supports their social challenge aimed at achieving political participation and enfranchisement through secular citizenship within a more equal (national) community. In this, both liberty and personal integrity have a socio-political application: they are the basis of a civil secular commitment to be a public-spirited citizen in a community of free individuals. Based on the ‘Germanic’, this chal-

⁶⁰ Walter Scott, *Ivanhoe*, ed. by A. N. Wilson (London: Penguin, 1986), p. 279. Cedric directs these words at the unfortunate (“hag”) Ulrica during his escape from Torquilstone Castle, ironically, when he is *disguised* as a priest. However, his integrity is underlined by his difficulty to keep to his role (a necessary ploy to beat the villainous Normans) and his courageous readiness to die when Ulrica threatens to reveal his true identity. This threat occasions his words. Cedric has little sympathy for the guilt-ridden Ulrica, a traumatised victim of war, violence, and coercion, who had acquiesced to become the paramour of her family’s murderer, “You hated him, and yet you lived [...] wretch! Was there no poniard, no knife, no bodkin!” (p. 278), which further underlies his somewhat one-dimensional steadfastness.

lenge takes its legitimacy from history, it is framed as reclaiming the political and cultural traditions of ‘the ancestors’.

The German and English realisations of the Germanic both developed global missions that were derived from specific qualities in *their* particular Germanic identities. These specifics were also the basis for the claim of each to represent a superior version of the Germanic. In both cases this superiority is based on each preserving key aspects most purely; and in both cases preserving these aspects safeguarded ‘freedom’. There is a difference in emphasis regarding what has been successfully preserved: the superiority of the English Germanic is based on political traditions which will liberate the world, the superiority of the German Germanic rests on preserving the stem culture of the European Germanic which can regenerate exhausted particularity and has the potential to grow to be universally human.

For both Fichte and Hegel, the Germans (die Deutschen) were an “Urvolk” from which “andere Stämme abgerissen [sind]”.⁶¹ It is the “Urvolk der neuen Welt“ who speak and continue to develop their “Ursprache”,⁶² which Fichte defines as truly communicative.⁶³ This communicative language gave them the intellectual and cultural tools to recognise and query negative social and moral developments in more depth than others⁶⁴ and resulted in their instrumental role in the sixteenth-century Reformation, which, crucially for Fichte, had broad popular involvement. With one eye on the French Revolution, which first descended into terror and then morphed into imperialist conquest, both focus on the need for a moral reformation before a political revolution can succeed (a point Schiller had already made in the fifth letter of his *Aesthetic Education* in 1795). These intellectual, spiritual, and ultimately moral abilities are the basis for the Enlightenment goal of “Vernunft in Freiheit [zu] realisieren” (Fichte) and of the “Realisierung der absoluten Wahrheit als der unendlichen Selbstbestimmung der Freiheit” (Hegel), which are global projects for humanity. That this goal had a socio-political dimension is clear from Hegel’s notion of (republican) “Volksgemeinden” and Fichte’s insistence that German city states provided a model for modern republicanism. Another way of describing this socio-cultural-political goal is achieving universal “Humanität”, a term associated with the work of Herder and Wilhelm von Humboldt.

⁶¹ Fichte, *Reden*, p. 359. Fichte is not talking about genetics or ethnicity (pp. 313f.).

⁶² Fichte, *Reden*, pp. 359, 344.

⁶³ Fichte, *Reden*, 4. and 6. Rede, pp. 311–327, 344–358.

⁶⁴ This is Fichte’s idea of a living language as a prerequisite for fully reflective intellectual enquiry.

A. W. Schlegel, who had formulated the difference between living and dead European languages four years before Fichte (albeit in less absolute terms),⁶⁵ saw the particular role of the German language in mediating human cultures. (Both Schlegel and Fichte frequented the same circles in Berlin at this time.) For Schlegel, himself a translator and mediator of literatures, the “vielfache Biegsamkeit” of German (shared by implication with all other non-neo-Latin Germanic languages) makes it particularly suited for translating foreign literature, allowing a high level of “Treue” (faithfulness).⁶⁶ Entering into the spirit and particulars of foreign cultures via their literatures and languages, was not just enriching but the basis of any global project of humanity that hoped to transcend particularity.

Es [das Übersetzen] ist auf nichts Geringeres angelegt, als die Vorzüge der verschiedensten Nationalitäten zu vereinigen, sich in alle hineinzudenken und hineinzufühlen, und so einen kosmopolitischen Mittelpunkt für den menschlichen Geist zu stiften. Universalität, Kosmopolitismus ist die wahre deutsche Eigentümlichkeit.⁶⁷

Because they had stayed put and preserved especially their language, the German(ic)s retained a direct link to the past, an unbroken tradition, which now gave them the capacity to recreate original traditions and a vitality to do so. They were a regenerative matrix that preserved universality by not specialising. Both Fichte and Schlegel merge national particularity with extended particularity that verges on universality: the Germans, with their unbroken link to the original broad Germanic base, may be specific but they also embody the modern people per se. They have a potentially global mission and are representative of what Europe is or can be.

The claims of the globally superior political traditions in England were based on similar thinking: the preservation of an unbroken tradition of original Germanic liberty, which in the nineteenth-century (imperial) present had a global job to do. Telling the story of Germanic liberty in England conforms to the “Whig Interpretation of History”, a way of writing history defined by Herbert Butterfield in 1931 as “prais[ing] revolutions provided they have been successful, emphas[is]ing certain principles of progress in the past and produc[ing] a story which is the ratification if not the glorification of the present”.⁶⁸

⁶⁵ Schlegel, *Romantische Literatur*, pp. 32–34.

⁶⁶ Schlegel, *Romantische Literatur*, p. 35.

⁶⁷ Schlegel, *Romantische Literatur*, p. 36.

⁶⁸ Herbert Butterfield, *The Whig Interpretation of History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1965), p. v.

In this interpretation, English history charts the successful preservation of original liberty, ensured by acts of liberation whenever external “chains” tried to subjugate it. It is too well known to need rehearsing in detail but, in broad terms, it stretches from at least Magna Carta (taking back control from an encroaching dominance of the crown) via the Reformation (taking back control of religion from a universalist papacy), and the Glorious Revolution of 1688 (limiting the power of the crown to confirm the constitutional monarchy) to the nineteenth-century Reform Acts which each increased the electorate. The result was an independent, free, and sovereign nation.

This narrative was used for conservative as well as radical purposes. In the late eighteenth century Edmund Burke used it for both: as a Whig he supported the American Revolution as the rightful assertion of liberty and independence, American liberty was after all a chip of the old block. In 1790, however, he was horrified by the French Revolution, based on an aberrant understanding of liberty and equality, which endangered the British model: in Burke’s view, Britain was already ‘free’. His contemporary, the radical Jacobin John Thelwall, one of Burke’s keenest public adversaries in the 1790s, agreed on the English trajectory of liberty but, unlike Burke, demanded a new (or revived) English republic: “our old constitutional writers [...] considered the King as none other than [...] the magistrate of the republic on England”.⁶⁹

English liberty was very much considered Germanic. Hurd had already in 1759 in his “Dialogues on the English Constitution” identified Saxon laws as the basis of the English constitution; the “spirit of liberty” was “the essence of the German constitutions”.⁷⁰ In his highly popular lectures at Cambridge in the 1860s, Charles Kingsley, Regius Professor of Modern History, told the story of “the Roman and the Teuton”, the relationship of early Christian Rome with the Germanics, which, although productive, was largely antagonistic. The Roman clergy were intent on abolishing ancient Germanic liberty and the laws that enabled it. “The old Gothic, the Franco-Salic, Burgundian, Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian laws all formed on the same *primaeval* model [...], liberty and self-government [were] common to all the race, but preserved alone by England.”⁷¹ They had been preserved in England because the English had “more than most escaped the taint of effete Roman civilisation.” They “therefore first of the lands, in the twelfth cen-

⁶⁹ John Thelwall, *The Tribune. A Periodical Publication, consisting chiefly of the political lectures of J. Thelwall*, 2 vols. in 1 (London: printed for the author, 1795), vol. I, p. 268.

⁷⁰ Published as part of Hurd’s *Moral and Political Dialogues*, vol. 2, 5th ed. (London: Cadell, 1776), pp. 115–118, esp. p. 118.

⁷¹ Kingsley, *The Roman and the Teuton*, p. 245. First published in 1864, these lectures were reprinted many times until the early twentieth century.

tury rebelled against, and first of them, in the sixteenth century threw off the Ultramontane Yoke”.⁷² Kingsley suggests that the Reformation had an early precursor in Henry II’s dispute with his archbishop Thomas Becket. The laws’ Germanic descent guaranteed their credentials, handling them well entitled the English to export them worldwide. “We brought the British constitution with us out of the bogs of [...] Jutland, [...] it has done us a good service, and will do, till we have carried it right round the world.”⁷³ Kingsley’s counterpart at Oxford, William Stubbs, agreed that the “English constitution” had best preserved its Germanic roots. Comparing Germanic constitutional histories across Europe, or across “Western Christendom” as he called it,⁷⁴ he concluded that out of the English, German, French and Spanish political systems, all of which descended from original Germanic law, “the polity developed by the German races on British soil is the purest product of their primitive instinct. [...] The chain of proof leads to the primeval polity of the common fatherland”.⁷⁵ Due to political and legal superiority English Germanicness becomes the basis for legitimising Empire.

An undergraduate at Cambridge during Kingsley’s tenure, Charles Wentworth Dilke opened the write-up of his grand tour around the Anglosphere, which took in India, Australia, and North America, in similar vein:

My fellow and my guide [on my travels] [...] is a conception, however imperfect, of the grandeur of our race, already girdling the earth. [...] In America, the peoples of the earth are fused together, but they are run into an English mould: Alfred’s laws and Chaucer’s tongue are theirs [...]. Through America, Britain is speaking to the world.⁷⁶

Dilke, young MP and future cabinet member, concluded his book, entitled *Greater Britain*, with the impassioned admonition that the destiny of a free humanity depended on the spread of British political culture around the world. It is easy to see a role for the “Christian gentleman” in this project, who spearheads this mission at home and abroad as an “officer and gentleman” and who is the middle-class modern version of the medieval knight, or perhaps even of the honourable and loyal “Germanus”. Both Kingsley and Dilke were liberals, politically progressive: Dilke, in many ways a political radical, supported the legalisation of

⁷² Kingsley, *The Roman and the Teuton*, p. 266.

⁷³ Kingsley, *The Roman and the Teuton*, p. 249.

⁷⁴ William Stubbs, *The Constitutional History of England in its Origin and Development*, vol. 1 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1873), p. 2.

⁷⁵ Stubbs, *Constitutional History of England*, p. 11.

⁷⁶ Charles Wentworth Dilke, *Greater Britain. A Record of my Travels in English-Speaking Countries*, 2 vols. (London: Macmillan, 1868/69), vol. I, pp. viif.

the labour unions and increased female suffrage; Kingsley was close to mid-century Christian Socialism and sympathetic to aspects of Chartism.

English and German writers agree that the Germanic heritage is based on a strong sense of liberty, shaped by Christianity, and inclined towards an ethos of personal integrity where honour is derived from honesty, courage, and loyal commitment. Both English and German sources claim that their own national culture derives in key elements from the best-preserved versions of the Germanic original and that their cultures of unbroken tradition need to be exported globally for the greater good of humanity. Through the prism of the chauvinistic and aggressive nationalism of the later nineteenth century, this is self-aggrandisement on a dangerous scale. In Britain it legitimised the Empire for many decades to come, in Germany it gave sustenance to the notion that German Kultur was different and superior to Western Civilisation and eventually, after 1945, it gave credence to the view that there was an unparalleled German trajectory of xenophobia, racism, and hubris from Herder to Hitler.

In the twentieth century, the received wisdom regarding Anglo-British and German political cultures tended to focus on the differences between them, to the point where the idea of the Germanic has disappeared from any discourse about English political tradition, in stark contrast to nineteenth-century discourse. It was *English* liberty, political and legal, that had restricted absolutism, shaped constitutional monarchy, safeguarded the rule of law and the role of parliament. German liberty, if it existed at all, expressed itself in thought, philosophy, those intangible *geistig* things: language and ideas. It was not political or legal, not rooted in practice and hence dangerously unstable, the province of mad philosophers or unhinged dictators.

The above differentiation was not alien to the mid nineteenth-century: the comparative linguist Max Müller, a German holding an Oxford chair, called “Protestant England” and “Protestant Germany” “the two champions of political freedom and of the liberty of thought”.⁷⁷ But we have seen that for Fichte, Hegel, and A. W. Schlegel ‘their’ liberty had a clear political edge. It is even possible to tell a German “Whig history”, although its narrative is more frustrating than its English counterpart. Starting from the federal structures of the old Reich, with its

⁷⁷ For Müller these “liberties” were the two sides of the same Germanic coin: “In recent times, the literature of the two countries has almost grown into one. [...] And the strong feeling of sympathy between the best classes in both countries holds out the hope that, for many years to come, the supremacy of the Teutonic race [...] will be maintained in common by the two champions of political freedom and of the liberty of thought – Protestant England and Protestant Germany.” Max Müller, “On German Literature”, in *Chips from a German Workshop*, vol. 3, 2nd ed. (London: Longmans, 1870), pp. 1–51, here pp. 1f.

long-lived estate-based checks on rulers' powers in its constituent territories, and its (Germanic) tradition of electing their imperial head, this 'Whig history' might move on to the Protestant Reformation as a moral liberation from corrupt and coercive structures (in the way Fichte and Hegel suggested) towards the mid-eighteenth-century debates about *Nationalgeist* and *Reichspatriotismus*⁷⁸ and the emancipating drive of German *Sturm und Drang*, which challenged the rules of neo-classicism as well as social hierarchy, before homing in on the nineteenth-century constitutional movement. An inverted version – as the road to National Socialism and Fascist dictatorship – was proposed by Peter Viereck during World War II, suggesting a tradition of 'revolts' against the Western (Judeo-classical-Christian) tradition of rational and legalistic approaches to law and society, which spans from Arminius' victory in the Teutoburg Forest via Luther's Reformation, *Sturm und Drang*, German Romanticism to Wagner and Hitler.⁷⁹

An invocation of German(ic) liberty certainly inspired the agitation preparing the central European effort to dislodge Napoleon's grip on continental Europe, which culminated in the military campaigns against the *Grande Armée* in 1813–15. Based on *levées en masse*, which suggested a *Volkskrieg*, these campaigns were, during the nineteenth century, mythologised as *Freiheitskriege*, or *Befreiungskriege* (1813/14).⁸⁰ This 'resistance' against Napoleon, which drew large numbers of volunteers, relied on hopes for constitutional reform. When, following the Congress of Vienna, these reforms were not forthcoming, the constitutional movement radicalised, especially among university students (*Burschenschaften*). To bolster their radical democratic claims, these groups frequently invoked an ancient German liberty, which they demonstratively referenced in their clothes, "altdeutsche (early modern) Tracht", alluding to the period of moral liberation during the Reformation, which should now be followed by political liberation.⁸¹ When the *Burschenschaftler* Carl Sand assassinated the writer and diplo-

78 See Nicholas Vazsonyi, "Montesquieu, Friedrich Carl von Moser and the National Spirit Debate 1767–69", *German Studies Review*, 22 (1999): 225–246.

79 Peter Viereck, *Metapolitics. The Roots of the Nazi Mind* [1941] (New York: Capricorn Books, 1965), pp. 1–15.

80 See Ute Planert, *Der Mythos vom Befreiungskrieg. Frankreichs Kriege und der deutsche Süden: Alltag, Wahrnehmung, Deutung 1792–1841* (Paderborn: Schönigh, 2007).

81 See Maike Oergel, "Revolutionaries, Traditionalists, Terrorists? The *Burschenschaften* and the German Counter-Cultural Tradition", in *Counter-Cultures in Germany and Central Europe. From Sturm und Drang to Baader-Meinhof*, ed. by Steve Giles and Maike Oergel (Bern: Peter Lang, 2003), pp. 61–86, here p. 69–75, and Oergel, "Constitutionalism and Cultural Identity as Revolutionary Concepts in German Political Radicalism 1806–1819", *Comparative Critical Studies*, 15:2 (2018): 183–205. The so-called early nineteenth-century "Deutschtümelei" (Teutomania) is a

mat August von Kotzebue in 1819, national liberal activity was crushed by the Carlsbad Decrees in 1819/20. Constitutional Germania returned in 1848/49, when an all-German parliament was elected through (largely) universal male suffrage to agree an all-German constitution. An especially commissioned painting of the allegorical figure of Germania, adorned with a black, red, and gold tricolour, took a central position in the meeting venue, St. Paul's Church in Frankfurt am Main, which was decked out in the same colours. The colours deliberately reference the 'Freiheitskriege', they originate with the *Lützower Jäger*, a militarily insignificant but much mythologised volunteer contingent of 1813/14. While no constitution could be agreed at Frankfurt, the colours remained linked to German liberal republican constitutionalism. They were not adopted by the *Norddeutscher Bund* or the new *Kaiserreich* of 1871 but revived by the Weimar Republic and used as national flags by *both* post-1945 German (republican) states.

Germanic liberty has since the eighteenth century been associated with freedom from bondage and coercion, with upfront directness, faithfulness, and self-reliance. Politically and intellectually, it has been associated with enlightened emancipation. All of these are 'progressive', forward-looking ideas and qualities that point towards modern civil society. Yet the strong medieval aspect in the conception of the Germanic either side of 1800 seems to confuse this reading, as modern medievalism has frequently been taken as socially and culturally backward-looking and conservative. Harking back to a feudal society suggests favouring strict social hierarchies while medieval Catholic 'faith' hampered rational (scientific) enquiry, both oppose 'progress'.

Modern (eighteenth- and nineteenth-century) medievalism, as it has been discussed here, results from historicist approaches to history, which tend to include a search for traditions that can legitimise contemporary projects in the way that radical John Thelwall invoked an ancient English constitution to overthrow 'Old Corruption'. The medievalism described here was overwhelmingly used to critique contemporary society. As the foundational culture of modern Europe, the Middle Ages appeared as the heroic storehouse of original values that needed to be revisited to improve the present, rather in the way that Henry Kenelm Digby suggested. In our context, the (medievalised) Germanic identity was used to challenge existing cultural, social, and political hierarchies and dogma in both England and Germany: neo-classicism, absolutism, capitalist cost-benefit calculations and the competitive selfishness of early industrialism, all of which were thought to erode social bonds. None of this precludes conservative intentions but

complex phenomenon, linked to political emancipation yet contaminated with xenophobia and racism from the start.

it is important to note that early nineteenth-century medievalism critiqued contemporary industrialism and capitalism because it considered them dehumanising and enslaving, illiberal. This critique is summarised in the widespread denunciation of mechanism,⁸² encapsulated in the concept of the *Staatsmaschine* or in emerging mechanised industrial production. Both the *Staatsmaschine* and mechanised production prioritise utility and efficiency, an approach criticised for its competitive profit-maximisation and material utilitarianism, which was felt to have infiltrated human relationships. When Novalis in his *Christenheit oder Europa* (1799) presents a medievalised world that is seemingly pro-monarchy and anti-progress, he is a case in point. Similar to Novalis' approach is the programme of the Young England Movement of the 1830s and 40s, headed by a religiously minded political group around the future Tory Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli. With strong High Church leanings and a keen sense of the social issues created by capitalist industrialism, they promoted an agrarian, paternalistic neo-feudal agenda and were keen on Digby's ideal of a new chivalry.⁸³ Their discontent with mechanising and utilitarian approaches to human and social relations is partnered with dissatisfaction about the absence of any spiritual dimension. Novalis' invocation of the satisfying spiritual power of medieval Christianity is similar to the religiosity of the Young England group, who had close links with the Tractarians and the Oxford Movement. One of their leaders, the Anglican priest John Henry Newman, eventually converted to Catholicism. Such conversions were not uncommon in German radicals, political and cultural: Friedrich Schlegel converted in 1806, Joseph Görres in 1819, both were former supporters of the French Revolution.

The medievalised Germanic – i. e. 'Dark Age' Germanic fused with Christianity which had 'tamed' ancient liberty and ameliorated early, pagan chivalry – is a consciously constructed identity, legitimised by historical tradition, promoting human rights and community. To what extent these were political rights and the community egalitarian is unclear and depends on whether liberty is conceived as including civil rights and to what extent the hierarchies are functionally republican rather than paternalistically personal. While Novalis and Young England's medievalism was not inclined towards equal political rights, they nevertheless insisted that their visions of society granted more entitlements to the poorest than current arrangements.

⁸² See Oergel, *Zeitgeist*, pp. 180–219.

⁸³ "If one book were chosen as the breviary of Young England, that book would be Kenelm Digby's praise of chivalry – the Broad Stone of Honour." Charles Whibley, *Lord Manners and his Friends*, 2 vols. (London and Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1925), vol. I, p. 133.

The Germanic defined as the ancestral source of political liberty and the origin of an ethos of personal integrity had a strong missionary character. The humanitarian obligation to export “good”, i. e. constitutional parliamentary government and the gentlemanly ethos of the modern knight, across the globe was genuinely believed in by its propagators, while at the same time serving to legitimate the British Empire’s colonial rule. Similarly, the German belief in their universal *Humanitätsideal* of free intellectual inquiry in a free public-spirited community supported anti-absolutist and anti-capitalist tendencies that had their own despotic drives. In both cases egalitarian liberty has a supremacist edge, derived from the sense of superiority that became attached to the Germanic because it was the root of modern Europe, ripe for historical fulfilment, and because it had been preserved and developed in (different) English and German versions in superior purity. Of course in the nineteenth century, any social and political egalitarianism would only readily apply to *white men*.

It is clear that ‘cradle of democracy’ and ‘heart of Europe’ sum up the similar yet distinct interpretations of the Germanic in the modern identity stories of Anglo-Britain and Germany. These labels closely reflect the aspects which the nineteenth-century interpretations identified as the respective basis for German or English claims to being superior Germanics: the English political and legal traditions of Germanic liberty that were secured because they were (supposedly) little affected by diluting influences, and the German claim that they were the root nation of Europe from which other Germanics had separated, especially in the Roman south, and which still possessed all Germanic qualities and the regenerative vitality to put them to best use.

The idea that often the ‘best’ Germanics were those that were least affected – though not untouched – by Roman influence, linguistic or political, still shows the origin of this identity construction in the *Querelle*: the emancipation of the post-classical moderns from classical antiquity. (This is not meant to deflect the issue that this idea of ‘purity’ was used to justify racism.) The exception regarding influence was of course that of Christianity, but here the blend of the Germanic with Christianity was often presented as so thorough that it appears Christianity itself only came to full fruition in this union, as an integral part of modern, post-classical Europe. However, the different foci, political institutions and regenerative matrix, which have been foregrounded here, should not obscure the shared interest in political liberty and the activation of Germanic identity to legitimate (increased) political equality in both nineteenth-century Germany and Britain.

4 What has this to do with Brexit?

It is evident to what extent the Leave Campaign’s slogan of “Take back control” is indebted to the discourse of liberty, independence, and sovereignty discussed here. Leaving a domineering continental system to be ‘free’ from coercion, from an external coercion that is felt to hamper independent decision-making and infringe (national) sovereignty, appears as another act of liberation, another throwing off of a yoke, like the Magna Carta, the Reformation, even the English Civil War. ‘Brussels’ often seemed to appear as a new ‘Rome’. That this was the right – the historically legitimate – thing to do was guaranteed by the understanding that (re-)establishing good democratic government, which was being obstructed, not to say denied, by dictatorial (unaccountable) foreign institutions, was the Anglo-British political tradition, in line with English political identity because England was the cradle of democracy, the home of ‘freeborn Englishmen’, which had preserved its ancient liberty exactly through its splendid isolation. Being the ones that split away seemed to continue a time-honoured tradition. Kingsley had observed,

Happy for us Englishmen, that we were forced to seek our adventures here, in this lonely isle; to turn aside from that great stream of Teutonic immigration; [...] keeping unbroken the old Teutonic laws, unstained the old Teutonic faith and virtue, [...] better so, than that we should have cast away our virtue and our lives, in that mad quarrel over the fairy gold of Rome.⁸⁴

To what extent this narrative informed British objections to the EU and was part of the “narrative of Brexit”⁸⁵ is borne out in recent Brexit research. An investigation into the motivation to vote for leaving the EU among candidates standing for election as MPs in 2017 showed that, irrespective of demographics, parliamentary candidates had voted leave due to their political views, and especially their concern over the state of democracy in the EU and their hope that by leaving democracy would be strengthened in the UK.⁸⁶ Similarly, the central position of taking back control over ‘laws’ in the pro-Brexit rhetoric, which particularly focused on the disenfranchising powers of the ECJ, has been shown to relate to the traditionally sacrosanct nature of parliamentary sovereignty, i. e. to the key evidence

⁸⁴ Kingsley, *The Roman and the Teuton*, pp. 15f.

⁸⁵ Tim Oliver, “Delving into the Books on Brexit”, *International Politic Review*, 7 (2019): 1–24, here: 4.

⁸⁶ Siim Trumm, Caitlin Milazzo and Joshua Townsley, “The 2016 Referendum: Explaining Support for Brexit among Would-Be British MPs”, *Political Studies*, 68:4 (2020): 819–836.

for being the cradle of (majoritarian) democracy. Animosity to the ECJ can be said to arise from an institutional ‘mismatch’ between the UK and the EU: the UK parliament, as a sovereign institution, should be able to legislate on any law and not have this sovereignty infringed by a superior ECJ.⁸⁷

Similarly, German readiness to enter into a close association with other, neighbouring, European nation states, such as the EU (or at least the support of a majority for this), can rely on a historical narrative: the idea that traditionally Germany’s position at the heart of Europe has made it a European matrix, *connected* to all later specific developments. This makes it easier to consider, with A. W. Schlegel, “daß [...] Europa im Mittelalter wirklich *ein* Land gewesen sei”. Whether this narrative implies that German identity would be subsumed into a European identity or whether, as the most populous and economically strongest European state, Germany will dominate Europe is undecided by this narrative. The question whether the federal structures of the first German Empire, which, excepting the Nazi dictatorship, were never fully abandoned, has affected German political structures and German self-understanding, has emerged in recent research on the Empire. Rather than a failed nation state, the *Reich* is emerging as an alternative to centralised and homogenised nationhood, as a different constitutional polity, which historically evolved according to gradually emerging consensus and need, based on deliberation and debate within a shared political culture, as Peter Wilson has recently suggested in *The Holy Roman Empire: A Thousand Years of European History* (2016), or to give it its American title, *The Heart of Europe*.⁸⁸ Wilson concludes his book with a comparison between the Empire and the EU, finding differences and key similarities.⁸⁹

In the end, one is compelled to consider geopolitics: on a landmass like the Continent with few natural borders, polities, communities, and states associate, secede, or merge more readily than on or among islands on the edge of such landmasses. However, any suggestion that German federal or European predilections are due to longstanding political traditions (that are simply not based on a centralised nation state) must be tempered by taking more recent historical experience into account. The memory of defeat, shame, and guilt, combined with the memory of loss of life, material destruction, and reinvention of statehood have equally contributed to late twentieth-century Germans’ readiness to buy into the EU. Big historical trajectories, whether they rely on the being the guardian of lib-

⁸⁷ Susanne K. Schmidt, “No Match Made in Heaven. Parliamentary Sovereignty, EU Over-constitutionalization and Brexit”, *Journal of European Policy*, 27:5 (2020): 779–794.

⁸⁸ Peter Wilson, *The Holy Roman Empire: A Thousand Years of European History* (London: Allen Lane, 2016), p. 686

⁸⁹ Wilson, *Holy Roman Empire*, pp. 680–686.

erty or the ‘Stammvolk Europas’ always foreshorten the perspective. Beyond the liberty narrative, Britain’s experience of loss of empire, which brought an alteration in its global status, was a difficult basis from which to promote a potentially further reduction of importance and sovereignty by being subsumed into a different, or even someone else’s, ‘empire’, the EU.

However, what should not be underestimated is the persuasiveness of long-range historical trajectories as narratives of identity. The longer a narrative reaches back, the more solid the identity appears. With these narratives come discourses of identity that are ready to be used, be this a discourse describing a European, i. e. non-nationalist, Germany or an Anglo-Britain that is the homeland of liberty and self-determination. It is in this sense that the identifications of ‘cradle of democracy’ and ‘heart of Europe’, which the above narratives suggest, make sense to many: the English Germanic, with its specific and clearly defined characteristics, is the result of moving away from the ‘heartland’, while the German Germanic remained in the middle, or at the centre, of this heartland.

