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Resurrection of THE Old Saxon Epic IN Leipzig

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# 1. Issues and Solutions

### 1.1 Project Background

This book began as a project to investigate the linguistic and paleographic evidence found on MS L with the goal of determining what could be said about that manuscript's age and authorship. In particular, it was the claims of the manuscript's identifier that MS L represents the oldest Heliand manuscript fragment found to date that inspired my research. Along the way, I became aware also of the possible connections between MS L and a rumor about Luther having possessed an ancient Germanic biblical codex. During my investigations, the focus of my project, by this point financed by a Fulbright fellowship at the University of Leipzig, turned ever more toward the discovery and verification of the Luther rumor and of evidence that might link MS L to the codex purportedly possessed by the Reformer. Not knowing fully what would come of this historical expedition, I continued with the original research design by visiting the location of each Heliand manuscript (i.e. Leipzig, Berlin, Munich, and London—leaving only the Vatican out of my visits due to the three-year closure of the Vatican library during my year-long stay in Germany)1 to see the manuscripts first-hand and to collect digitized images of them for further investigation.

I came upon the idea of using digitized versions simply out of necessity. The University of Leipzig Library was hesitant to allow me access to the actual manuscript fragment (it having just come from being displayed to the public, which display I had missed by several months by virtue of not having been in Europe at the time). Instead, I was offered a high-resolution digital image of both sides of the manuscript. Thanks to several years of experience as a web designer, I have acquired enough skill with the program Adobe Photoshop to be able to control and enhance the color depth of images in order to bring out detail otherwise obscured by darkness and muddiness of hue, both results of either (1) the digitization process (i.e. digital photography), and (2) aging of the manuscript itself. Since the inks used to write on the parchment by their very nature differ from the chemical make-up of the sheep skin, even those areas that appear at first sight to have been lost to age often retain enough of a chemical trace or at least

 $<sup>^{\</sup>scriptscriptstyle 1}$  Nevertheless, I was able to obtain a copied version of MS V by mail.

impression or quill scratch to be identifiable. This process is not perfect, but it acts in a way as a poor man's version of the expensive and highly involved process used to discover the original text of the Archimedes Palimpsest ("The Imaging of the Archimedes Palimpsest," *The Archimedes Palimpsest Project*). Having been given less than personal access to MS L, I was in not able to propose such a drastic study of the parchment and inks. Furthermore, the cost of an involved materials study was not in my budget. For now, I hope to do nothing more than to stoke the fire of interest in MS L, so that some day performing more detailed and expensive processes on the manuscript will become justified, if they are indeed needed at all. That is, though my Photoshop process is imperfect in certain ways, it does stand up to scientific critique. All the more important, it has revealed several small but important elements heretofore overlooked and/or missed by those who published the first transcriptions of the MS L text (cf. 2.3).

As I explain in Ch. 11, much of the current bottleneck in *Heliand* research—and for that matter in Old Saxon studies—stems from problematic transcriptions of the *Heliand* texts. These problems stem from there having been different transcribers for each manuscript, transcriptions having been performed during different eras between which the emphasis on academic rigor varied, the improper standardization and leveling out of important variation between the manuscripts, and altogether false reading of the characters actually present on the parchment. Initially, my design was to make my own transcriptions of all the texts—something I am still working on and plan to publish in the future. In my being the sole transcriber of all six manuscripts, I hope to avoid the four problems presented above. In this way, future research into the spelling and therefore dialect variation in each of the manuscripts will be less susceptible to transcription differences, hopefully yielding more accurate results and better conclusions about the origin of the *Heliand* epic.

### 1.2 Scope and Direction

Although the scope of my research changed, I still find it necessary to provide background for each of the manuscripts involved (cf. Ch. 2). Similarly, I highlight the errors in the standard transcriptions later (cf. Ch. 4) in order to introduce a set of my own transcriptions, which I then use in a textual comparison with Luther's translation of the New Testament Gospels. The

future publication of my transcriptions of all six *Heliand* manuscripts will include a side-by-side comparison not only with one another where these overlap, but also with Luther's translations. The purpose of this will be to bring the body of evidence brought to light in this book full-circle. Unfortunately, this question is too large in scope to fit into a single book. Thus, the following thesis sets the stage for further research into linguistic clues that speak for or against what can be presumed as Luther's purpose in possessing a *Heliand* codex—namely, as a reference for his own translation.

Yet this proposition, whether proved by linguistic comparison or not, is not the only possible conclusion. If the Luther rumor is indeed true—i.e., that he possessed a *Heliand* codex—there are still a variety of reasons beyond that cited above for why Luther might have been interested in an ancient retelling of the Gospels. Suffice it to say that until the surfacing of MS L in 2006 no amount of hypothesizing about Luther's reasons admitted too much, because nothing in the way of evidence was even remotely available to verify that he had such a document. In fact, the rumor had long become considered just that—a piece of folklore like many others that are perpetuated about the controversial figure that was Martin Luther.

#### 1.3 Considerations

The discovery of MS L in Leipzig—a mere 60 km away from Luther's Wittenberg (within a day's travel in his time)—brings the veracity of the rumor back into question. Is MS L the long missing evidence that will shed light on this rumor and link Luther to the Heliand? Only time and scientific inquiry will tell. Outside of a quotation directly from Luther himself proclaiming his use of the *Heliand*, the realms from which any evidence for or against the rumor will come will be either the historical record (i.e. secondary claims, rumors, historical timing, etc.) or a linguistic analysis attempting to find evidence in Luther's writing that exposes his use of *Heliand* material. While one might think first to turn to chemistry and physics to gain some

The  $\it Heliand$  has only been called such since Schmeller in 1830 (cf. 4.1.3). Luther would have therefore likely used some periphrastic description when referring to the  $\it Heliand$ , as was done by the several other men in Early Modern history who record knowledge of it. As has been done with these men's references, any mention by Luther of an ancient Germanic Gospel harmony would likely only spur debate about which medieval documents he really meant.

answers, the fact is that any material analysis of MS L would not yield any answers about Luther: (1) as a medieval document assumed to be from the ninth century, any chemical evidence from the parchment and/or ink would not be of any value in linking the manuscript to sixteenth-century Luther (that is, a materials analysis would only verify or debunk the beliefs about the age of the document as a ninth-century product); (2) even if a materials analysis were to promise answers to our questions, current interest in MS L is nowhere near the level that is needed to justify the cost of such an analysis nor the intrusion into the document. Until interest in MS L grows, analysis of the material of MS L is not realistic. Ultimately, a material analysis would be useful in determining the veracity of the Luther rumor only if the results were to show MS L to be a forgery. Then the Luther link would likely be a moot question (although, depending on the age determined for a forgery, new questions might arise). In short, a materials analysis seems unnecessarily tangential to any progress that can be made.

While some have questioned the authenticity of MS L (Judasson 2007), the general consensus among scholars, gleaned from the appearance of the document and the language of the text on it, is that it is authentic ninth-century work. In any case, until proven otherwise, it is at least necessary to assume MS L is authentic in order to drive investigations of it forward. Thus, it is a beneficial assumption.

## 1.4 Methodology

As stated, I came upon several problems in the field of Old Saxon Studies. The multitude of transcriptions available for the growing body of manuscripts is the largest problem. The variations that exist between transcriptions that purport to reflect the same manuscript impacts dialect-based studies of the Old Saxon language. This is no small problem, since any question about the *Heliand* poet—his identity, his location, his native dialect, etc.—are not answered by any obvious means; rather, these characteristics about the anonymous author can only be gleaned from the linguistic information made available by the manuscripts. For example, researchers have often interpreted variations in the spelling of words as they occur on the manuscripts—with those from MS M often receiving the most favor for being 'correct'—as reflecting pronunciation differences in the dialects of each particular manuscript's scribe. Thus, various proposals about the na-

tionality of the poet have been proposed. These range from a native Old Saxon speaker to a complete foreigner, i.e. a western Frankish Latinate speaker. In between, there is a range of proposals that suggest he was possibly Frisian, Anglo-Saxon, Frankish, and High German dialect speaker. Strangely, these proposals about the nationality of the poet are based upon the dialect information of the manuscripts' scribes. It should be noted that these two characters—the poet and the scribe—are not necessarily played by the same person. In fact, given the dating of the manuscripts widely assumed (cf. 2.1.1), it is most likely that not one of the extant manuscripts is the poet's original. Nevertheless, studies regularly take the linguistic and paleographic evidence as relevant to the discussion about the poet, and most proposals accepted today suspect a northerner of some nationality who later moved southward to a scriptorium where certain reference materials would have been on hand. Proposals for the location of the scriptorium vary, as well: Fulda, Essen, Werden, Verden, Vreden, Mainz, Magdeburg, to name just a few.

Given that the spelling differs between manuscripts in mostly minimal ways, the difference of a single letter carries immense weight in the decisions of modern scholars about the nature of the scribes and poet. Thus, errors in modern transcriptions are immensely problematic. Take, for example, Old Saxon hêrron (gen. sg. of hêrro) 'Lord': is Behaghel's rendering <hêrren>, Sievers' spelling <heren>, or Schmeller's form <heren> the original (cf. 4.1)? The form in question is the rendering of exactly the same word from the same place in the text (line 5830). Here, two modern transcribers admit that they are deviating from what they found on the manuscript: the italicized characters are suppositions—either because the transcriber could not read the character (Schmeller) or because he is trying to level out variation in order to offer a 'perfectly systematic' version of the text (Behaghel). Thus, it is apparent that different motivations lie behind each transcription. As more manuscripts have been discovered, transcriptions of each have been undertaken separately from one another. Consequently, the body of transcriptions that exist for all the manuscripts is vast and highly varied. No one individual has yet undertaken a transcription of all six extant manuscripts so as to provide a full library of original text variations as they truly occur in their original form, performed according to the same standards and motivated by one single scholarly goal: accurate representation of the characters as they occur ink-on-parchment. Thus, my first