

# The Invention of the Viking Horned Helmet

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On his head was one of those impractical but imposing helmets embellished with spreading ox-horns which among the heathen were a badge of grandeur. That was a comforting sight, implying that the pirates expected fair play and no bloodshed; no sensible warrior would risk his life under a helmet which could be knocked flying by a single stroke.

Alfred Duggan, *King of Athelney* (1961)

A picture has held us captive for over a century. Staring at prospective purchasers from the side of herring jars, looking manly and musky on a Guy Laroche perfume, this face has launched a thousand brands. A travel writer in 1990, chasing the monsoon to the edge of the Rajasthan Desert, matter-of-factly observes: "I passed a faded billboard saying 'For the Fulfillment of Life Join the Indian Navy', and around the next bend came upon three houses and a large pond in which several buffaloes lay, their heads and horns protruding above the water like Viking helmets."<sup>1</sup> This simile would have made no sense before the last quarter of the nineteenth century.

For it was not until 1875 that humanist scholarship, misunderstood archaeological finds, heraldic origin fantasies, and the Great God Wish (whom Jacob Grimm was first to name) had worked their magic. A small herd of "viking" helmets was now on the move, led by an innocent-looking cow-horn model created that year by Wagner's costume designer, Professor Carl Emil Doepler, for the first Bayreuth production (1876) of the full *Ring des Nibelungen*.<sup>2</sup> Putting cow-horns on *Nibelungenlied* heads was a departure from tradition: until 1878 not a single illustrated version of that courtly south-German poem had depicted such headgear.<sup>3</sup> Wagner's *Ring* commingled Old Norse and Middle High German motifs, creating an impression, which has endured, that valkyries and norns, Valhalla and the twilight of the gods, were timelessly German. When Doepler supplied Gunther's youthful retinue, Siegfried's funeral cortege, and Hunding himself with homed helmets, a piece of armour long attached to continental "barbarians" became part of this heady stew. The sheer variety of bony growths portrayed in Knut

<sup>1</sup> Alexander Frater. *Chasing the Monsoon* (New York, 1991), p. 183.

<sup>2</sup> See Peter Cook. *A Memoir of Bayreuth 1876* (London, 1979); Detta and Michael Petzet, *Die Richard Wagner-Bühne König Ludwigs II* (Munich, 1970); Gisela Zeh. *Das Bayreuther Bühnenkostüm* (Munich, 1973). Lithographs of Doepler's costume-drawings were published by Clara Steinitz. *Der Ring des Nibelungen: Figuren* (Berlin, 1889), with a dedication to Kaiser Wilhelm II.

<sup>3</sup> A horned Hagen. drawn by Hermann Vogel. adorns Wilhelm Wagner, *Unsere Vorzeit. Deutsche Heldensagen erzählt für Jugend und Volk* (Leipzig, 1878), p. 281; more horns by Vogel on pp. 35, 137, and 341. On *Nibelungenlied* illustrations, see Ulrich Schulte-Wulver, *Das Nibelungenlied in der deutschen Kunst des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts* (Giessen, 1980); Wolfgang Storch, ed. *Die Nibelungen. Bilder von Liebe. Verrat und Untergang* (Munich, 1987).

Ekvall's sketch of the third act of the Bayreuth *Gotterdammerung* recalls Lord Copper's attempts to draw a cow: "He tried different types of horn — royals, the elegant antennae of the ibex, the vast armoury of moose and buffalo ... none looked right."<sup>4</sup> Cosima Wagner, politically incorrect to the end, lamented that Doepler's costumes brought to mind "Indianerhauptlinge."<sup>5</sup>

Within twenty years the horned helmet spelled "viking" in advertisements, in paintings, in popular histories and children's books, even on a Scandinavian cruise menu (23 July 1895) of the Hamburg-America liner *Columbia*.<sup>6</sup> Classic cow-horn helmets grace the half-title and title pages of Kaiser Wilhelm II's viking ballad *Sang an Ægir* (Berlin 1894).<sup>7</sup> The illustrator, Emil Doepler the Younger, had assisted his father in costuming the 1876 *Ring* and later became - like the older Doepler - a great breeder of short horns for Nordic heads. By 1900, the one artifact that, as archaeologists assure us, was never connected with vikings had become their signal distinction.<sup>8</sup>

Most eighteenth-century vikings wore winged helmets, the cap of choice for wild, romantic natures and refined sensibilities. The pagan vikings besieging Paris in nineteenth-century French art remained elegantly winged throughout their ordeal. Horned helmets, as in Auguste Racinet's *Le Costume historique* (Paris 1876-1888), were reserved for early Britons and Gauls, who had some historic claim to them. The only exception I have found is the most famous viking of them all, Ragnar Lodbrok, who dons, in an 1851 drawing, a custom-made goat-horned helmet (useful if a dragon attacks from behind).<sup>9</sup>

In Germany and England, the arrival in the last two decades of the nineteenth century of the vikings' horned helmet can be tracked through a forest of illustrated editions, translations, and adaptations of Old Norse works. One such crossroads is

<sup>4</sup> Evelyn Waugh, *Scoop* (London, 1938), bk. 3, ch. 1; Penguin ed. 1943, p. 180. See Petzet, *Richard Wagner Bühne*, fig. 41, for Ekvall's "Überführung der Leiche Siegfrieds," published in the *Leipziger Illustrierte* (1876).

<sup>5</sup> Zeh, *Bühnenkostum*, p. 28; Cook, *Memoir*, p. 53.

<sup>6</sup> Bremerhaven, Deutsches Schiffahrtsmuseum. On Wilhelm's own annual "Nordlandfahrt" and his association with the shipping company, see Birgit Marschall, *Reisen und Regieren: Die Nordlandfahrten Kaiser Wilhelms II* (Heidelberg, 1991), esp. pp. 181-187.

<sup>7</sup> See Marschall, *Reisen und Regieren*, fig. 26.

<sup>8</sup> For a wise, humane, and informative essay on viking helmets, see C.F. Meinander, "Vikingahjälmen i saga och sanning," *Bland böcker och människor. Bok- och personhistoriska studier till Wilhelm Odelberg den 1 juli 1983* (Uddevalla, 1983), pp. 249-75. The changing image of the viking has been the subject of many good books and articles over the past two decades, including: D.M. Wilson, *Vikings and Gods in European Art* (Højbjerg, Denmark, 1997); Wilson, "The Viking Age in European art - a note," in *The Waking of Angantyr: The Scandinavian past in European culture*, ed. E. Roesdahl and P. Meulengracht-Sørensen (Aarhus, 1996), pp. 176-191; B. Allzen, *Tid for vikingar: vikingartid lanseras i nordisk konst* (Malmö, 1990); E. Roesdahl, "Vikingerne i dansk kultur," *Fortid og Nutid*, no. 2 (1994), 158-72; Martin Djupdrst, *Billeder af vikingen* (Copenhagen, 1998); B. Schmutzler, "Zum Erbe der Wikinger: Aspekte der Rezeptionsgeschichte" in *Die Wikinger* (Landesmuseum Koblenz, 1998), pp. 177-87; J. Mjöberg, *Drömmen om sagatiden*, 2 vols. (Stockholm, 1967-67), esp. II, 78-80; Mjöberg, "Romanticism and Revival" in *The Northern World*, ed. D.M. Wilson (London, 1980), pp. 207-38; *Dragons et drakkars, le mythe viking de la Scandinavie à la Normandie XVIIe-XXe siècles* (Caen, 1996); and the essays, including Gerd W. Weber's "Das 'nordische' Erbe. Die Konstruktion 'nationaler' Identität als Vorzeitmythos und Geschichte in Skandinavien und Deutschland" in *Wahlverwandschaft, Skandinavien und Deutschland 1800 bis 1914*, ed. Bernd Henningsen et al. (Historisches Museum Berlin, 1997).

<sup>9</sup> M. Bescherelle, *La Mythologie illustrée* (Paris, 1856), p. 89.

Esaias Tegner's popular poetic romance *Frithiofs Saga*, published in Sweden in 1825. Frithjof, like Macpherson's Fingal and Ossian before him, wears an "eagle's helm" (variously interpreted by illustrators) for most of the nineteenth century.<sup>10</sup> The gentle philosopher does not don a horned helmet until the late 1870s, in Wilhelm Wagner's popular *Unsere Vorzeit: Nordisch-germanische Götter und Helden in Schilderungen für Jugend und Volk*.<sup>11</sup> A drawing by F.W. Heine in the same collection features a legendary Swedish sea-king, whose helmet supports cylindrical protuberances (p. 71). An almost identical picture portrays Frithjof in an 1878 American version of Tegner's poem;<sup>12</sup> the same generic "viking" illustration surfaces again in a popular 1880 English adaptation of Wagner's stories bearing a new title: *Asgard and the Gods: The Tales and Traditions of Our Northern Ancestors for Younger Readers*.<sup>13</sup> The race between England and Germany for ownership not only of the sea but of the Norse past had begun.

During the 1890s, the horned-helmeted viking changed from a series of widely scattered occurrences into a kind of weather. Mass-produced children's books were an ideal medium for imprinting the image on the popular imagination. An artist from Munich contributed several horned helmets to Sabine Baring-Gould's 1890 version for young people of *Grettir the Outlaw*.<sup>14</sup>

R. M. Ballentyne's *Erling the Bold: A Tale of the Norse Sea Kings*, was published in London in 1869, with drawings by the author. All eight illustrated editions published before 1880 give Erling the winged viking hat (and stylishly accessorized swan-prowed longship) called for by the text: "a helmet of burnished steel, from the top of which rose a pair of hawk's wings expanded, as if in the act of flight" (pp. 60-61, 81); horns appear for the first time in the ninth edition (1890, p. 392). In 1861 George Webbe Dasent, Victorian England's greatest Icelandicist, had published a translation of *Njáls saga* entitled *The History of Burnt Njal*. The original edition displays no horned-helmeted viking; the 1900 frontispiece does. In Andrew Lang's *The Red True Story Book* (London, 1895), the illustrator, Henry Ford, gives horns to a viking watching from shore as the longship of the doomed Olaf Tryggvason approaches (p. 255). In *A School History of England* by C. Fletcher and Rudyard Kipling, the same artist depicts the landing of the Danes, who arrive with horned helmets and a matching horned dragon-prow.<sup>15</sup>

Popular history took quickly to the horned helmet. *Ein Kampf um Rom*, Felix Dahn's interminable novel dealing with the last years of Gothic rule in Italy, was

<sup>10</sup> See Meinander, pp. 262-64.

<sup>11</sup> 2 edn (Leipzig and Berlin, 1878), p. 79. (I have not seen the first edn., [1874].) Wagner's table of contents attributes the illustration to Karl Ehrenberg: the caption, to Bernhard Morlins. A horned-helmeted warrior guards the gods' lawcourt in a drawing by the elder Doepler, p. 277. Shortly before the war, cowhorns win out for good over wings: see *The Song of Frithiof*, retold in rhyming fourteeners by G.C. Allen with illustrations by T.H. Robinson (London, 1912), pp. 15,43,55,63,80,90, 101. The translator notes the German Emperor's "Song to /Egir" (recently performed at the London coronation entertainment of George V) and his gift of a statue of Frithjof to Norway.

<sup>12</sup> *Frithiofs Saga: A Legend of Ancient Norway*, trans. L.A. Sherman (Boston, 1878), p. 205.

<sup>13</sup> Adapted M.W. Macdowell, ed. W.S.W. Anson (London), p. 62.

<sup>14</sup> *Grettir the Outlaw: A Story of Iceland*, with ten page-illustrations by M. Zeno Diemer (London, 1890), pp.76, 116,369.

<sup>15</sup> (Oxford, 1911), p. 36. St Augustine preaches to a horned-helmeted Ethelbert, p. 34.

published in 1876. In its final pages, Scandinavians on dragon ships arrive in the Bay of Naples to rescue the surviving Goths and repatriate them to the north. Dahn's text describes the viking chieftain's helmet as adorned with a pair of foot-long black sea-eagle wings; a 1900 illustration by Hugo Braune places a more up-to-date horned helmet on one of the shipmen.<sup>16</sup> An engraving in *The Illustrated History of the World for the English People*, published in New York between 1881 and 1884, depicts three horned-helmeted pagans burning their chieftain's corpse on a dragon ship (I, 726). In 1893, the painter Frank Dicksee makes room for two horned helmets in his version of this favourite scene.<sup>17</sup> Gustaf Cederstrom's 1889 depiction of Anskar's mission to the Swedes is the first on that popular subject to show horned-helmeted heathen.<sup>18</sup> A long line of German artists had painted Charlemagne's conversion of the Saxons and his destruction of their idol; but not until 1894, in a painting by Hermann Wislicenus for the Imperial Palace at Goslar, are horns put on their helmets — and on the idol's head too.<sup>19</sup>

A 1904 drawing of the Eddie hero Helgi, his perfect horned helmet, and his blonde valkyrie, appeared in the much-altered sixth edition of Johannes Scherr's *Germania*, now dedicated to Kaiser Wilhelm II. The five previous editions have no horned helmets; the new illustration prefaces a chapter entitled "Heidnisch-germanisches Land und Volk".<sup>20</sup> Herder taught that every nation had to have a mythology, even an ersatz one. Germany lacked a heroic age, so borrowed that of Scandinavia, laying claim to the viking-age North as *Germania germanicissima*, or "Ultra-German Germany".<sup>21</sup> Helgi's horned helmet was part of this take-over, calling up a subterranean politics of allusion and quotation. By 1900, it had become a stamp of approval, a disembodied smile, a floating demilune that crowned heads of value: pagan, warlike, and Nordic.

In England and Germany, the horned helmet quickly found its way onto viking heads; not so in nineteenth-century Scandinavia. Lorenz Frølich's 1877 school-mural illustrating the ransoming of Svein Forkbeard, depicts such a helmet but on a peripheral, apparently non-Danish figure.<sup>22</sup> In Sweden, the first home-grown horned-helmeted viking materialized — briefly — in 1881, in August Strindberg's illustrated *Svenska folket i helg och söken, i krig och i fred, hemma och ute eller ett tusen år af svenska bildningens och sedernas historia* (Stockholm). Carl Larsson's drawings include the election of a king by his people (one of whom wears a horned

<sup>16</sup> Dahn, *Gesammelte Werke, Erste Serie* (Leipzig and Berlin, 1900), II, 449; description of helmet, p. 459.

<sup>17</sup> *A Viking's Funeral*, Manchester City Art Galleries; see Wilson, *Northern World*, p. 215; *Vikings and Gods*, p. 62.

<sup>18</sup> Nationalmuseum, Stockholm; reproduction in Bo Lindwall, *Carl Larsson och Nationalmuseum* (Stockholm, 1969), pp. 33, 44-45.

<sup>19</sup> Monika Arndt, *Die Goslarer Kaiserpfalz als Nationaldenkmal: Fine ikonographische Untersuchung* (Hildesheim, 1976), pp. 25, 188-90, and fig. 4.

<sup>20</sup> *Germania: Zwei Jahrtausende deutschen Lebens kulturgeschichtlich bebildert* (Stuttgart, 1876); 6 edn Hans Prutz (1905), p. 15.

<sup>21</sup> The most relevant of Klaus von See's fundamental essays on this subject are collected in von See, *Barbar, Germane, Arier: Die Suche nach der Identität der Deutschen* (Heidelberg, 1994); see also his *Deutsche Germanen-Ideologie vom Humanismus bis zur Gegenwart* (Frankfurt a.M., 1970).

<sup>22</sup> Djupdræt, *Billeder*, p. 22; Dansk Skolemuseum, Copenhagen.

helmet) in the egalitarian and democratic pre-Christian age imagined (at least before 1900) by Strindberg (ch. 2); and a troop of blonde-maned Varangian guards in Constantinople, one of whom possesses bulging biceps and a horned helmet (ch. 10). Larsson (1853-1919) is responsible for only one more such helmet - in his controversial *Jugendstil* painting of 1915 depicting the midwinter ritual sacrifice of a Swedish king before the heathen temple at Old Uppsala.<sup>23</sup>

In the three decades and more between Larsson's early and late horned helmets, I can find no other Scandinavian examples. The many vikings depicted in Gustav Storm's 1899 Norwegian translation of *Heimskringla* wear only conical helmets — in long boring rows.<sup>24</sup> The 329 illustrations in the first volumes of Adam Fabricius' *Illustreret Danmarkshistorie for folket* (Copenhagen, 1854) contain not a single horned helmet; nor are there any in the fourth edition (1914), revised by Knud Fabricius with many new illustrations. In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, a few Swedish and Danish illustrators put horned helmets on gods and giants, on Huns and legendary heroes, but not on Scandinavians who lived between 800 and 1100.<sup>25</sup> Frederik Winkel Horn's 1898 Danish translation of Saxo Grammaticus' *Gesta Danorum* includes some three-hundred illustrations by Louis Moe. In volume one, which treats the prehistoric period, horned helmets appear on a god, a giant, a Saxon, a Slavic barbarian, and the semi-mythical King Frodi;<sup>26</sup> the same artist's drawings for volume two, which teems with vikings, lack all such helmets. This absence — like Sherlock Holmes's dog not barking in the night-time — may be a clue, pointing — as Frodi is in the picture — to a path leading away from Scandinavia ... and towards Germany.

Although no cow-horn graces a viking's helmet before the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the head of his German cousin had for some time been weighed down by what looked like an Indo-European game-farm. Sabine Baring-Gould opens his Victorian history of *Germany* with an arresting picture of blue-eyed Teutons and Cimbri snowboarding down the slopes of the Alps into Italy in 113 BC, with "the heads of wolves and bears and oxen on their helmets, the latter with the horns; and others again had the wings of eagles spread, and fastened to their iron caps."<sup>27</sup> Five centuries of Tacitus commentaries, beginning with Conrad Celtis (1459-1508) and his Vienna lectures of 1500, laboured to produce this zoo. Tacitus had opened the discussion in AD 98 by observing of the Germans that *vix uni alterive cassis aut galea* 'scarcely one or two have metal helmets or leather headgear' (ch. 6). The first printing of the rediscovered *Germania* included excerpts from Diodorus Siculus describing the headgear of the Gauls as follows: "They wear bronze helmets with high extensions, which give them an appearance of great size. On many helmets, one sees horns, attached in the expected places; on

<sup>31</sup> See Carl Larsson, ed. T. Gunnarsson (Goteborg, 1992); O. Isaksson et al., *Midvinterblot* (Stockholm, 1993).

<sup>24</sup> *Snorre Sturlasons Kongesagaer. Med illustrationer* (Kristiania).

<sup>25</sup> C. von Saltza's horned-helmeted figure missing a right hand in Fredrik Sander's *Edda Scimund den Vises* (Stockholm, 1893), p. 77, is not, as sometimes maintained, a viking but the god Tyr.

<sup>26</sup> *Danmarks Krønike* (Copenhagen and Kristiania), I, 70, 82, 128, 178.

"(London, 1886), p. 1.

others, frontal images of birds or four-footed beasts" (5.30.2). Plutarch would place similar helmets on the proto-Danish Cimbri (*Marius* 25), but this only confirmed what the humanists already knew. For Heinrich Bebel (1472-1518) had established by 1500 that when ancient writers mentioned Gauls or Celts, they meant Germans as well.<sup>28</sup> Beatus Rhenanus, editor of the *Germania*, enthusiastically agreed: "Who will deny that those ancient Celts were similar to the Germans and in fact were Germans?"<sup>29</sup> In 1616, citing the authority of Tacitus, Diodorus, and Plutarch, the historian and geographer Philip Cliiver (1580-1622) gave horned headdresses and helmets to the early Germans in his illustrated *Germania antiqua* (Leiden, pp. 360, 364, 400). Ole Worm (1588-1654) was still pondering horned helmets in 1643, in a dissertation inspired by the discovery a few years earlier of the longer Gallehus horn *{Danicorum monumentorum libri sex* [Copenhagen, 1643], pp. 344-439). A happy blending of all the northern barbarians and their headgear has continued without a break down to our own century. When in 1875 Carl Emil Doepler turned to Tacitus' *Germania* for guidance about the dress and armour of the early Germans, he found in the standard commentaries much the same information about horned helmets available to Worm and his sixteenth-century predecessors — and to us in *Die Germania des Tacitus*, erläutert von Rudolf Much, 3 edn rev. by Herbert Jankuhn, ed. Wolfgang Lange (Heidelberg, 1967), pp. 144-46.

Illustrations of horned helmets on "Germanic" heads form a similarly unbroken chain. In the late 1630s, Christian IV of Denmark commissioned a group of artists from Utrecht to paint forty-four scenes from his country's history. A 1639 drawing by Crispin de Pas the Younger depicts an animal sacrifice, presided over by a Cimbrian priest(ess) of advanced age, wearing not only a horned helmet but also spectacles.<sup>30</sup> Nicolaus Kniipfer, a German painter who moved to Utrecht c. 1630, includes a horned onlooker in his sketch of King Sjold's single combat (p. 11). But no viking-age Dane in the series wears a horned helmet.

In seventeenth-century Germany, horned-helmeted warriors are portrayed in illustrated accounts of Arminius, prince of the Cherusci, who in AD 9 destroyed the legions of Quinctilius Varus in the Teutoburg Forest (thereby becoming the leading symbol of German resistance to the Roman yoke). The title page to Daniel Casper von Lohenstein's massive baroque novel of 1689 depicts a shield-bearing German under a horned helmet. Arminius here and throughout the work wears a winged helmet, as a chieftain should; but his men are in rougher garb. The wedding portrait (p. 1164) features two horned cows and four horned helmets, two of which serve as wall-decoration.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>28</sup> *Schardius Redivivus*, 4 vols (Giessen, 1673), I, 128-9; see Frank L. Borchardt, *German Antiquity in Renaissance Myth* (Baltimore, 1971).

<sup>29</sup> *Castigationes in Libellum de Germania* (1533), p. 422; see James Hirstein, *Tacitus' Germania and Beatus Rhenanus, 1485-1547: A study of the editorial and exegetical contribution* (Frankfurt a.M., 1995), pp. 212-213.

<sup>30</sup> H.D. Schepelem and Ulla Houkjær, *The Kronborg Series. King Christian IV and his Pictures of Early Danish History* (Copenhagen, 1988), plate 4 (p. 51).

<sup>31</sup> *Grossmüthiger Feldherr Arminius I* (Leipzig); other horned helmets, pp. 1 and 716.

In 1699, Christoph Weigel's picture-album of historical events includes an Arminius scene with horned helmets.<sup>32</sup> The existence of an Arminius drama by Schlegel (1743), a trilogy of plays by Klopstock later in the century, and a much performed national drama by Kleist (1808), probably ensured that some horned-helmeted early Germans made an occasional stage-appearance in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century. In the spring of 1875, before commencing work on his costume designs, Carl Emil Doepler accompanied Richard Wagner and Cosima to a Berlin performance of Heinrich von Kleist's *Hermannsschlacht* by the Meininger, a troupe famed for the authenticity of its historical costumes.<sup>33</sup> A drawing by Hugo Strohl of the 1875 Vienna performance of the drama *appears* to show Arminius in a horned helmet.<sup>34</sup> One late-nineteenth-century German painting, depicting an exuberantly winged Arminius giving Roman treasure to some wild-looking pagan priests, crowns a prominent Cheruscan warrior with a pair of horns that would have done an aurochs proud.<sup>35</sup> Tacitus's bare-headed Germans have come a long way. •

Claude Levi-Strauss once said that totemic animals were not good to eat but good to think about. People, especially amateur archaeologists, have in the last century given almost too much thought to the horned helmet. Late-nineteenth-century artists and writers could have derived inspiration from at least three finds published by archaeologists before 1875: two horned men on the shorter Gallehus horn (Schleswig, 1734; c. AD 300-400); twin Bronze-Age horned-helmeted figures (Grevensvaenge, 1799; c. 800-900 BC); and the horned dancer on a helmet-plate matrix (Torslunda, 1870; c. AD 600).<sup>36</sup> But more often the influence seems to have gone the other way. When Oscar Montelius published the Torslunda find in 1872, he described the dancer's headgear as "a helmet with two elevations, bird-necks turning towards each other".<sup>37</sup> By 1923, C.A. Nordman could unhesitatingly describe a crescent-moon headdress on a continental coin as a horned viking helmet.<sup>38</sup>

Axel Holmberg, who analyzed in the 1840s the Bronze-Age petroglyphs from Bohuslan, Sweden, assigned them to the viking age (an error corrected only in 1874). His popular illustrated work of 1852, *Nordbon under hednatiden*, identified the horned headgear as helmets, and informed readers that such helmets consisted of an ox's headskin with horns and sometimes skull attached; the horns were also, he claimed, attached to iron helmets. "Certainly," he ventured, "one knows of ornamental wings on such helmets."<sup>39</sup> In 1905, a letter of enquiry to *The Saga-Book of the Viking Society*

<sup>32</sup> *Sculptura historiarum et temporum memoratrix* (Nuremberg), on page devoted to first century BC.

<sup>33</sup> Cook, *Memoir of Bayreuth 1876*, pp. 24-25.

<sup>34</sup> Cologne Theatre Museum; reproduction in Max Grube, *The Story of the Meininger*, trans. A.M. Koller (Coral Gables, Fla., 1963), plate VIIB; discussion of the 1875 *Arminius*, pp. 69-73.

<sup>35</sup> Staatsbibliothek (Stiftung Preuss. Kulturbesitz), Berlin; see Hannsferdinand Dobler, *Die Germanen: Legende und Wirklichkeit von A-Z: ein Lexikon zur europäische Frühgeschichte* (Barcelona, 1975), p. 279.

<sup>36</sup> Illustrated in Meinander, pp. 253, 255; and in Terry Gunnell, *The Origins of Drama in Scandinavia* (Woodbridge, Suffolk, 1995), pp. 49-66.

<sup>37</sup> "Ett fynd fran slutet af jernaldern," K. Vitterhets Historie och Antiquitets Akademiens Manadsblad (Stockholm), p. 89.

<sup>38</sup> *Nordens äldsta mynt*, Finskt museum (Helsingfors), p. 17; noted by Meinander, p. 254.

<sup>39</sup> *Nordbon under hednatiden. Popular framställning af vara förfaders ädla kultur*, 2 vols. (Stockholm). I. 558-59.

as to whether there was any authority for a winged viking helmet was answered in the negative by Karl Blind — but with an aside confirming that the Thracians to whom Herodotus attributed ox-horned bronze helmets were related to "Norsemen and the Germanic race". In the next volume of *Saga-Book*, a District Secretary reported that, although there was no evidence for wings on viking helmets, there was plenty for "the horned helm... in early pictured representations".<sup>40</sup> For him, as for many in Victorian England and Wilhelmine Germany, the Torslunda horned-dancer image, the horned helmet (c. 100 BC) given up by the Thames in 1868, and the horned figures on the Gundestrup cauldron (c. 100 BC), discovered in 1890, reflected unmediated historical reality, the latest in viking-age chic.

A similar merger of artifact and wishful thinking obtained in heraldic circles. Bull- and buffalo-horns are a familiar and much commented upon feature of thirteenth- and fourteenth-century German and Scandinavian heraldic crests. There seems to have been an early scholarly consensus about the existence — before the twelfth century — of war-helmets bearing actual bull-horns. In 1643 Ole Worm confirmed: "Most of our nobility wear horns on their helmets, the insignia of their distinguished families, now and again picked out in various colours; formerly real horns were taken from animals."<sup>41</sup> An engraving in Joseph-Francois Lafitau's *Moeurs des sauvages americains comparées aux moeurs des premiers temps* (Paris, 1724) quietly juxtaposes classical horned satyrs, Cliiver's horned early German, a headdressed American native, the horned Moses, the horned Alexander the Great, and two heraldic horned helmets (II, 19-20). Friedrich Warnecke's *Heraldisches Handbuch* (Frankfurt a.M., 1882), illustrated in 1879 by Emil Doepler the Younger, proposed that the origin of the helmet crest was to be found in the real bull-horns and eagle-wings worn in ancient times (p. 18). Before the late nineteenth century, heraldic handbooks do not mention the viking; by the turn of the century, he is a forerunner of the Germanic knight. In both *The Art of Heraldry* (London, 1904:152) and *A Complete Guide to Heraldry* (London, 1909,1978:213), Arthur Fox-Davies reports: "A large proportion of German crests are derivatives of the stock basis of two bull's horns, which formed a recognised ornament for a helmet in Viking and other pre-heraldic days". In the 1911 *Encyclopedia Britannica*, Oswald Barron asserts that the crested helm "has its pre-heraldic history ... in the wings, the wild boar's and bull's heads of Viking headpieces" (XIII, 314). No doubts, no if's or but's: the unknown is firmly used to explain the known.

Until the viking age was invented, there was no horned-helmeted viking, and vice versa: the two go together like Easter and bonnet. A "viking age" is first mentioned in 1873, in two independent Danish and Swedish articles; the period gets its first monumental write-up in Johannes Steenstrup's four-volume *Normannerne* published between 1876 and 1882.<sup>42</sup> Perhaps only an expansionist, empire-building era could have thought up an age that began with naval attacks on foreign shores and ended when these attacks ceased. The horned viking helmet was just one of countless colorful items in the armoury of a fin-de-siecle Europe fascinated

*Saga-Book* 4 (1905-6), 412; 5 (1907-8), 51.

*Danicorum monumentorum libri sex*, p. 384.

Meinander, p. 260.

by war and its tools. Schools preached physical courage, bands of brothers, survival of the fittest, patriotism, and imperialism. Young people read about barbarian invasions and sea-warriors, stories in which war represented motion and life, the test of man's worth and the nation's moral fibre; in which viking poetry is described as falling like sword-strokes in the thick of battle, its metre inclined "like our ancestors themselves" to violence, a verse cadenced by the crashing blows of sword and axe. With godliness everywhere giving way to manliness, the inhabitants of a newly created age suddenly looked silly in tremulous wings. Unlike the Boy Scouts, the horned helmet had no single progenitor; its conception was not planned by any official body. The offspring of long-term continuities and complex genealogies, it evolved informally over the centuries as the preferred headgear of unspoiled, uncosmopolitan Germanic barbarians. In Wilhelmine Germany it came to represent a synthesis of old Germanic life and the Nordic race.

"Nothing Roman, everything German," was how one Munich historian, Wilhelm von Giesebrecht, greeted in 1871 the foundation of the Second German Empire.<sup>43</sup> The Doeplers, pere et fils, carried out Wagner's similar orders in 1875. During the long reign of Queen Victoria's grandson, Kaiser Wilhelm II (1888-1918), the terms of the 1871 antithesis changed, as German nationalism was transformed from its old liberal to its new imperialistic-racial pattern. The Kaiser's interlinked passions for Wagner, viking ships, voyages to Scandinavia on the royal yacht, and helmets were the subject of innumerable cartoons. The caption to Olaf Gulbransson's 1911 drawing in *Simplicissimus* reads: "On his northern journey, when the Kaiser gazes, daydreaming, upon the fjord, viking ships (courtesy of a Saxon travel agency), manned with heroes, will appear before his eyes."<sup>44</sup> Three of these vikings wear horned helmets.

For Wilhelm II and the Bayreuth circle, Scandinavia was the cradle of German culture, preserving the folklore of an unspoiled, unmixed, unbowed people. Julius Langbehn's *Rembrandt als Erzieher*, a runaway bestseller of the early 1890s, maintained that great art sprouted only in the fertile soil of folk habits.<sup>45</sup> A 1908 cartoon by Thomas Theodor Heine, *Werdandi-Bund*, mocking the similar sentiments rehearsed by Wagner's son-in-law, Henry Thode, depicts one such tribal peasant-warrior artist, directed by another in horned helmet. The caption says: "Fatally ill German art will only recover if the hard German fist creates mythically powerful valkyrie-swarms on the basis of folk-sympathies."<sup>46</sup> A cow-horn anchors this viking's pince-nez. So effective were the satirists that by the mid-thirties the Nazis decided that the only good Norseman was a dehorned one.<sup>47</sup>

<sup>43</sup> "Nichts römisch; alles deutsch!" in *Der Deutschen Hochschulen Antheil am Kampfe gegen Frankreich*, ed. L. Bauer (Leipzig, 1873), p. 50; cited K. von See, "Arier und Semiten" in *Barbar, Germane, Arier*, p. 283. On the creation of a past for the new Empire, see Eric Hobsbawm, "Mass-Producing Traditions: Europe, 1870-1914" in *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge, 1983), pp. 263-304, at 273-279.

<sup>44</sup> *Simplicissimus* 13 (26 June 1911); see Marschall, plate 41.

<sup>45</sup> See Benedikt M. Nissen, *Der Rembrandtdeutsche Julius Langbehn* (Freiburg i.Br., 1926).

<sup>46</sup> Eugen Roth, *Simplicissimus: Ein Rückblick auf die satirische Zeitschrift. Auswahl und Text* (Hannover, 1954), p. 108.

<sup>47</sup> Typical is the noble bareheaded viking portrayed by Wilhelm Petersen in the appalling periodical *Germanen Erde* 1 (1936), 205. See Michael Muller-Wille, "The political misuse of Scandinavian prehistory in the years 1933-1945" in *The Waking of Angantyr*, pp. 156-175.

This paper, in memory of a distinguished and much missed scholar, has restricted itself to illustrating when and where the horned helmet of the early Germanic barbarian seized hold of the "viking", and how quickly the exotic became everyday and acceptable — like Indian tea in an English home. Time and again, over some four centuries, the horned helmet has materialized, like a fairy godmother, to mark and legitimize the birth of a Germanic consciousness, conceived by kings and scholars in emulation of the Caesars. Imaginations were stirred by this image of something powerful, something mute, primal and pagan, out of the distant past. In George Grosz's 1921 cartoon, *Richard-Wagner-Gedenkblatt*, it is easy to recognize, beneath horned helmet, barbaric spear, and shaggy pelt, the German burgher cobbling together the lineaments of desire.<sup>48</sup> In a post-war Swedish novel, ninth-century merchants gawk at a raider with "horns on his helmet like a bull."<sup>49</sup> Auden's Rome, lamed by domestic woes, tax-evaders, and "cerebrotonic Catos", lingers, while "Altogether elsewhere, vast/ Herds of reindeer move across/ Miles and miles of golden moss,/ Silently and very fast."<sup>50</sup> However "wrong", the horned viking helmet has been a recurrent fantasy transmuting the desert of daily existence into contours rare and strange.<sup>51</sup>

<sup>48</sup> Hartmut Zelinsky, *Richard Wagner — ein deutsches Thema. Eine Dokumentation zur Wirkungsgeschichte Richard Wagners* (Frankfurt a.M., 1976), p. 161; cartoon also in von See, *Barbar, Germane, Arier*, p. 30. and in Solveig Weber, *Das Bild Richard Wagners: Ikonographische Bestandsaufnahme eines Künstlerkults*. 2 vols (Mainz, 1993), II, fig. 142.

<sup>49</sup> Jan Fridegård, *Offerrok* (1949), last volume in *Trilogin om trälen Holme: Sacrificial Smoke*, trans. Robert E. Bjork (Lincoln, Neb., 1990), p. 166; more horns, pp. 168-70.

<sup>50</sup> W. H. Auden. *The Fall of Rome* (1947).

<sup>51</sup> Many individuals have had a part in this short essay, supplying me with leads, apt quotations, photographs, and published material. Heartfelt thanks are owed to my Toronto colleagues and friends: Ross Arthur, Walter Goffart, Ruth Harvey, Linda Hutcheon, Michael Hutcheon, David McDougall, Ian McDougall, George Rigg, and Jennifer Rigg; and, outside Toronto, to Robert Bjork, Margaret Clunies Ross, Martin Djupdrat, Beatrice La Farge, Niels Lund, Andrew Wawn, David M. Wilson, and the late Christine Fell.