

*The Names of the Barbarians*  
*The Philologist, the Tribe, and the Empire*

**Ethnic History and the Modern Nation**

In the fall of 1848, Jacob Grimm published *The History of the German Language* [*Geschichte der deutschen sprache*]. It was a sort of final statement of Grimm's, a 1,000-page work on linguistic and ethnic history, the last large work that he would write. Grimm would later call the book his finest accomplishment.<sup>1</sup> It was certainly one of his most explicitly nationalist works. In the preface, Grimm celebrated heroic German accomplishments: the Germanic tribes of the first millennium, he declared, had thrown off the yoke of Roman domination, decided the victory of Christianity in Europe through their conversion, and stemmed the influx of Slavic peoples into the western parts of Europe.<sup>2</sup> In this way, the ancient tribes had asserted their autonomy and held their territory – they had been “undefeatable [*unbesiegbar*].”<sup>3</sup>

As the title of the work declared, however, its topic was linguistic history and as such related to Grimm's other, earlier, and more famous scholarly accomplishments in the field of grammar. In this late study, Grimm reviewed the historical evolution of Germanic languages to mine it for clues about the historical evolution of the Germanic tribes, especially in the first millennium, from their appearance in Roman textual sources through the Migration Period to a phase of relative stability in the early Middle Ages. *The History of the German Language* was devoted to diachronic grammatical development but also to ancient Germanic ethnic life, which according to Grimm had been historically varied and geographically diffused but nonetheless coherent and continuous. The tongues of the manifold Germanic tribes had all grown from the same “trunk [*stamm*]” and the modern descendants of tribes – Bavarians, Hessians, Franks, and so on – belonged together in one single nation;<sup>4</sup> local variability did not preclude historically anchored unity.<sup>5</sup> Grimm realized that German unification in his own day would bring forth an entirely new political entity in

Europe, but he argued that it would be rooted in a preexisting family cluster of ethnic communities;<sup>6</sup> such references to the diverse but associated German tribes as constituents of a coherent nation were in fact commonplace in contemporary political discourse.<sup>7</sup> By late 1848, Grimm had already publicly introduced the philologist – or introduced himself – as the figure who could expertly answer the question “what is a people?” However, *The History of the German Language* converted the central premise of Grimm’s philological politics – shared language tracked nationhood – into its key methodological assumption: the study of Germanic dialects allowed the scholar to retrieve an ancient ethnic history that would enrich the people’s collective self-understanding and allow the king in Berlin to grasp the proper future unit of government, which was not “old Prussia” but a unified Germany – a Germany “reborn.”<sup>8</sup>

Significantly, the speedily composed work<sup>9</sup> made this argument in the year of revolution, in 1848, when Grimm believed that the prospect of German *einheit* [“unity”] was drawing closer.<sup>10</sup> While Grimm had written the book in 1847, he did not halt its publication when revolutionary events escalated in 1848; instead, he deemed its message all the more relevant.<sup>11</sup> He dated his preface in Berlin on March 11, 1848, only a few days before the outbreak of violent unrest in the city, and finished his shorter dedication to his colleague and Göttingen ally the literary historian and publicist Georg Gottfried Gervinus on June 11 in the same year, when both served as delegates in the first German national parliament.<sup>12</sup> As the dates of the two introductory texts indicate, the book really was finished and published during a tumultuous time. In the late summer and early fall of 1848, Grimm’s Frankfurt letters to his brother Wilhelm in Berlin mixed discussions about the political campaign for German conquest of Schleswig and Holstein with mentions of the book’s publication process.<sup>13</sup> Grimm’s study of ancient Germanic linguistic and ethnic distinctiveness as well as tribal political and cultural self-assertion belonged to the year of the (defeated) revolution and (failed) national unification.

Commenting on the dramatic surrounding circumstances, Grimm also announced that he had written an utterly political book. In the four-page dedication to Gervinus, he called his work “political through and through [*durch und durch politisch*],” intended for readers who wished to understand the task and the dangers facing the “fatherland.”<sup>14</sup> It was political in that it excavated linguistic and tribal history for the purpose of validating national unity in the form of an integration of multiple German lands into a coherent constitutional order under a German ruler. Grimm’s plan was

to have his brother Wilhelm send the two volumes to Frederick William IV of Prussia for perusal in September 1848 – the philologist was yet again eager to reach the king and deliver to him the philological justification of German unification.<sup>15</sup> Yet after having advocated for continued war against Denmark even after Prussia had signed an armistice accepting Danish annexation of Schleswig, Grimm nonetheless hesitated. He suspected that his own insistence on an unremitting struggle for German unity throughout 1848 might have alienated the king: “Now it could be that I have angered him [Frederick William IV] and he won’t look at the letter and the book [*jetzt kann es kommen, dass er mir zürnt und brief und buch nicht ansieht*].”<sup>16</sup>

Grimm’s resolutely nationalist work, however, written with the intent of strengthening the nation by proving its rooted unity and integrity, also showed how the philologist consistently had to assume an extra-tribal, extra-ethnic vantage point. Most of the sources that Grimm relied on to describe the Germanic tribes were Roman, and Grimm even admitted that the principal tools of philology, comparative grammar chief among them, were born of empire, a political formation that strove for hegemony partly by means of surveying and categorizing various ethnic communities and assembling and studying their languages. There was no access to the barbarians unmediated by empire. Politically, Jacob Grimm was a nationalist, but epistemically, he hailed from the imperial realm, and he quietly acknowledged the tension. The philologist, the guardian of nationhood, was an imperial figure.

### Nationalist Dreams and Nightmares

To write about ancient German ethnic history, Grimm knew, was to write about barbarians, the peoples beyond literate civilization. Many other scholars before Grimm had written histories of the barbaric German populations,<sup>17</sup> and throughout the nineteenth century, figures across the political spectrum engaged in speculations about primitive society, including Karl Marx,<sup>18</sup> who would read *The History of the German Language*.<sup>19</sup> Grimm did take note of a few contemporary colleagues, for instance, Johann Kaspar Zeuss’s (1806–56) work on the Germans and their neighboring tribes from 1837.<sup>20</sup> In this context, Grimm’s declared methodological intervention lay in his systematic attention to the correlation between linguistic development and tribal life, including tribal migration in the final centuries of the Roman Empire.<sup>21</sup> A novel kind of ethnographic history could be written, Grimm claimed, on the basis of observations of

patterns in language use, because the lexicon and grammar of Germanic tongues provided a record of collective life underexplored by historians. In relation to the discipline of history, linguistic study afforded a fresh starting point.<sup>22</sup> For Grimm, though, this transition from diachronic linguistics into the realm of history also represented a satisfying completion; he wrote that he had always wished to move “from words to things [*von den wörtern zu den sachen*],”<sup>23</sup> from the grammatical development of German to the historical reality of German-speaking communities. The titles of the forty-two chapters reflected the program articulated in the preface. For the most part, sequences of chapters on phonetic and grammatical phenomena, such as the “sound shift [*die lautverschiebung*],” were followed by sequences of chapters on different tribes, such as the Goths, Franks, Hessians, and Bavarians.<sup>24</sup> The purpose of the book was not to trace linguistic development for its own sake but to use the record of that development to survey the internal diversity of Germanic tribal life, establish the long and interconnected histories of multiple groups, and ultimately prove the resilient cohesiveness of the present-day German people, its unity-in-diversity over time.

As Grimm set out to reveal the proper boundaries of the modern political unit by exploring the historical affiliation of the present-day descendants of ancient Germanic tribes, he also pointed out the two enemies of a nationally based geopolitical order: the artificial, shrunken principality and the artificial, swollen empire. In the year 1848, Germany was an “unnaturally divided fatherland [*widernatürlich gespaltnen vaterland*],” still afflicted by the “unauthorized division of princes [*unbefugte theilung der fürsten*].”<sup>25</sup> To Grimm, language history revealed the connections of multiple German dialects and therefore issued in a call to unity against patrimonial rulers who treated populations as their “movable property [*fahrender habe*].”<sup>26</sup> At the same time, language imposed a definite outer limit on political rule, a line that must not be transgressed by imperial ambition. Grimm’s concise principle of international politics read: “speakers of a foreign tongue should not be conquered [*anders redende nicht erobert werden sollten*],” at least among sufficiently large and “prevailing [*waltenden*]” peoples.<sup>27</sup> Empire building was illegitimate because it departed from the principle of national-linguistic integrity, although not all nations were equally viable and some would not escape hegemony; tiny nation-states for small peoples would remain as impracticable as the tiny German principalities.<sup>28</sup> Speaking of Europe in 1848, the year of revolutions, Grimm did see the national “principle [*grundsatz*],” which had always been so obvious to the “linguistic researcher [*forscher in*

der sprache],” finally gain ground around him – it seemed “at last to permeate the world more and more [*endlich die welt zu durchdringen*].”<sup>29</sup> In his view, the nationally oriented philologist had been a visionary of contemporary European geopolitics.

*The History of the German Language* corroborated political statements Grimm had made in other works and venues. For him, two simple propositions identified the nation as the proper unit of politics: mutually intelligible speakers should neither be divided internally nor dominated by regimes from other linguistic groups. In his prefatory remarks, however, Grimm admitted that the borders of a linguistic area could shift as languages developed further in time. He closed his dedication to Gervinus by envisaging a bright but distant future in which conflicts among Germanic nations such as Denmark and Sweden would come to an end and different Germanic languages would ultimately begin to merge into one, possibly through processes of modern standardization and intensified communication; Grimm did not expound further. German national unification might one day be followed by an even greater Germanic supra-regional unification. Some borders, however, would likely never fade, namely those between Germanic, Romance, and Slavic languages.<sup>30</sup> These were the three language groups in Europe, Grimm stated, and hence the three ultimate units of European sociocultural life,<sup>31</sup> and the tenacious inner grammatical structure of their languages would prevent them from blending into one another.

While a community could expand due to linguistic convergence within a family of languages, it could also lose ground, at least recently conquered ground. Grimm’s reconstruction of tribal history was partly an account of irreversible losses afflicting Germanic Europe. There had been, Grimm reported, a number of Germanic tribes that at some point had ceased to speak a wholly Germanic language and ended up shedding their inherited identity during their advances and adventures – his examples included the Franks, the Burgundians, the Lombards, and in some way also the Anglo-Saxons.<sup>32</sup> The fates of these groups served as a warning to Grimm’s contemporaries: Germanic Europe could very well continue to shrink and dissolve, a prospect of cultural contraction he found truly menacing. Each of Grimm’s aims – the recollection of past Germanic achievements, the delineation of present German unity, the future consolidation of German identity – was haunted by fears of cultural oblivion, territorial fragmentation, and national diminishment.

This concern with threats to nationhood indicated a deeper nationalist dimension of *The History of the German Language*. The book offered something of an existential justification for the preoccupation with the

national past. The recovery of a long Germanic history, Grimm believed, would shore up a collective identity that alone could safeguard experiential meaning even in a volatile modern world. The nation's knowledge of its own achievements and its own outlines was so important, because this knowledge could guarantee a sense of continuity and integrity that in turn would endow present-day events with significance. Without specifying the source or character of the threat, Grimm nonetheless spoke with some horror about a great wave that could drench all individual countries in a "bottomless sea of generality [*bodenlosen meer einer allgemeinheit*]." <sup>33</sup> The menace he feared was not necessarily an apocalyptic disaster, some violent conflagration such as a continental war, but a sinister spread of uniformity across a previously varied cultural topography. Enemies such as petty autocrats and rapacious empire builders threatened the nation, but Grimm also had vaguer apprehensions of a future process of homogenization that would ultimately erase individuated national being.

Grimm's worry about cultural dissolution revealed his commitment to a theory of collective identity over time. In his nightmare vision, a reckless indifference to history, on the one hand, and deplorable cultural homogeneity, on the other, implied each other. The danger that Grimm imagined was not necessarily domination at the hands of a more powerful people or state, but that a narrow, even "self-serving [*selbstsüchtigen*]" focus on the present and its concerns could erode a historically shaped collective identity and empty life of meaning. <sup>34</sup> To reject history was to turn away from one's temporally extended formation and thus to choose, inexplicably for Grimm, alienation from oneself. Disinterest in the collectively shared identity incrementally built up through a shared historical life was, to him, not even a coherent attitude. One could not enjoy and affirm one's present existence, Grimm seemed to imply, without first recognizing the importance of the past, since complete indifference to one's history meant that one willingly ceased to embody a continuous, coherent, non-punctual center of experience. Nations were differentiated communal human identities formed in history and sustained by recollection, and such recollection framed and bestowed meaning upon whatever people did, encountered, and experienced as communities; resilient and bounded cultural and linguistic particularity was the precondition for a collective existence charged with genuine purpose. The problem with the Germanic tribes that had gradually abandoned their language such as the Franks or the Burgundians, Grimm claimed, was not simply that their linguistic and cultural defection had prevented greater Germanic hegemony in Europe; the problem was that they had drifted apart from their fellow tribes and

indeed forgotten their *own* origin and cultural character. The problem, then, was that they had “largely lost themselves [*groszentheils sich selbst verloren*]” and that their troubles and triumphs presumably carried less existential weight, even for themselves, because of their truncated present identity.<sup>35</sup> They were no longer themselves, and in a future “bottomless sea of generality [*bodenlosen meer einer allgemeinheit*],” a global condition of cultural flatness, everybody would have lost themselves.<sup>36</sup>

Today many readers would simply reject Grimm’s endeavor to recall past achievements and detect collective boundaries for the purpose of preserving an exclusive collective personality, but the project of *The History of the German Language* also suffered from inconsistencies on its own terms. Grimm’s seemingly crisp delineation of the national political space stood in tension with his own compressed account of historical Germanic accomplishments in the very same prefatory remarks, specifically his celebration of tribal expansion in the era of the weakened Roman Empire. Foreign rule was unacceptable, he stated, and yet he glorified Germanic ventures and resettlements all over Western Europe – in Gaul, Britain, Spain, and so on – as advances that brought freedom to new areas<sup>37</sup> rather than condemn them as illegitimate campaigns of conquest. In his affirmation of tribal migration across large distances into lands occupied by others, Grimm contradicted his anti-imperial nationalist principles. If he disapproved of foreign rule and yet approved of territorial occupation by the Goths, Vandals, Lombards, Angles, Saxons, Jutes, and Franks, he might be seen to condemn permanent colonial domination over other peoples but not to condemn some form of ethnic removal, where one people, moving as a compact “mass [*masse*],”<sup>38</sup> pushed another one out of a particular space. Grimm would then implicitly hold that it was wrong for one nation to rule another, but not exactly wrong for the Anglo-Saxons to set out on a large-scale land-grabbing operation and marginalize or even annihilate the Celts on the British Isles, since such a removal would not have resulted in a long-term cultural and linguistic hierarchy among two or more coexisting peoples.

Even when Grimm wanted to commemorate the waves of tribal advances of the first millennium as spectacular events that testified to the explosive force of Germanic peoples, his comments on linguistic abandonment indicated that such settlements on already occupied land had negative effects – for the invading Germanic groups. The result of too forceful a march into new territories had not infrequently been permanent self-alienation – the Franks, Burgundians, Visigoths, and Lombards had lost their Germanic tongues and hence their Germanness in the process of moving into new

areas. Even if Grimm did not explicitly admit that Germanic migration and expansion was as illegitimate as systematic empire building, he noted that tribes that had ventured into formerly Roman territories did not, in the end, strengthen the Germanic hold over Europe. Instead, they all seem to have crossed some invisible line, some linguistic boundary between the Latin and Teutonic worlds, and shed their languages.

In light of these arguments, one can distill Grimm's nationalist principles in the following way: never dominate another linguistic group, never tolerate domination by another linguistic group, never dissolve the ties to your linguistic kin, never let rulers artificially cut you off from your linguistic kin, but also make sure not to venture too far away from your fellows into alien linguistic areas, because you might then lose your own culture, mired as it will be in a foreign one. The most adventurous tribes had pushed Germanic languages the farthest geographically but also eventually stopped speaking those languages. Grimm did not want to reject Germanic migration but did suggest that territorial advances might attenuate tribal identity – tribes had never, he implicitly conceded, been untouched by the process of migration and perhaps did not even constitute perfectly self-reproducing population groupings, forever impervious to foreign influence.<sup>39</sup> Expansion could result in illegitimate domination of other ethnic groups but also in the dilution and loss of one's own language and culture – this was Grimm's stubbornly *nationalist* argument against any enterprise of territorial encroachment.

### The Turn to the Tribe

In 1848, the year of transnationally connected upheavals,<sup>40</sup> Grimm focused as much as ever on the nation, made a historically and linguistically supported case for German national unification, and advanced criteria for how to settle the borders of nations and specify the collective self of future self-rule. The Germany he envisioned was not, he argued, the result of some arbitrary segmentation of populations but an ancient and natural being that had long existed, in the form of a plurality of affiliated tribes. Cultural unity and solidarity, this implied, were not state impositions or intellectual fabrications but a real legacy of the past, and the philologist was its guardian. Grimm made one further political move, namely to turn against a powerful tradition in political philosophy, or against political philosophy altogether. *The History of the German Language* focused on the barbarians rather than the empire, the tribe rather than the city. In so doing, Grimm's nationalism broke with the history of political thought



and its preoccupation with the constitution of the polity – he was, as always, exclusively interested in constructing a plausible narrative of historical identity.

Jacob Grimm was not uninformed about current political events and not uninterested in debates in political philosophy; he knew how political thinkers wrote and thought, what issues they tended to focus on, and what concepts they tended to use. As mentioned before, one of his closest friends and allies was Friedrich Christoph Dahlmann, a prominent member of the Göttinger Sieben and a fellow parliamentarian in Frankfurt, who much like Grimm wanted to balance monarchical government with representation of the educated middle classes in the frame of a mixed constitutional order.<sup>41</sup> Contrary to the Germanic philologist Grimm, Dahlmann was a scholar in the tradition of political thought. In his most influential work of political thought, *Die Politik, auf den Grund und das Maaß der gegebenen Zustände zurückgeführt* ["Politics, traced back to the ground and measure of the given conditions"] from 1835, one can recognize the persistence of the classical tradition.<sup>42</sup> Dahlmann began by critically discussing social contract theory and then launched into a review of the major forms of government – monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy – followed by an analysis of the political structure of Athens, Sparta, and Rome. A separate chapter was devoted to modern government, paradigmatically embodied in the British political system. In the historical overview of canonical political thought placed later in the book, he showed his preference for a more pragmatically oriented Aristotle over Plato's political ideals and summarized the contributions of the most prominent political thinkers of the modern age, Hobbes, Locke, Montesquieu, and Rousseau. Dahlmann's work would to this day be recognizable as an introduction to central issues and thinkers in European political thought. The focus on basic constitutional forms, the overview of historical examples and decisive thinkers, as well as the discussion of the fundamental problem of legitimate power and the right to resist, marked it as a standard work.

Dahlmann certainly cared about historical particularity,<sup>43</sup> the predominant concern of Jacob Grimm. Throughout *Die Politik*, he returned to the focus on constitutional viability and stated his preference for careful examinations of how different political orders suited specific historical contexts. In line with this pragmatic focus, Dahlmann also made the case for an empirically supported debate, for a school of political thought that would take the particular conditions of any given country into account, its constitutional traditions, historical development, geographic location, and demographic profile. Such a turn to historical particularity did not

constitute a break with the tradition – Dahlmann identified with Aristotle, Montesquieu, and Burke. Grimm, by contrast, considered his work on linguistic and ethnic history an utterly political text, and yet it contained not a shred of the materials dealt with by Dahlmann. Grimm's historical work may have been political, but it cared about the tribe rather than the city, the *Stamm* rather than the *polis*. Its central classical figure was not Aristotle but Tacitus, whose *Germania* had been rediscovered in the late fifteenth century.<sup>44</sup>

What sort of conception or vision of politics could be derived from the study of tribal Germanic populations as they appeared in the historical record? Grimm was well acquainted with the image of the Germanic barbarian in European intellectual and cultural history since Tacitus, and certainly not the only German intellectual who returned to *Germania*.<sup>45</sup> To name one prominent example, Fichte had the habit of reading out passages from Tacitus's text around the time he composed the *Addresses to the German Nation*.<sup>46</sup> A premise of this Roman, Tacitean tradition was that the Germanic tribe had emerged as a separate and continuous form of communal life in opposition to Roman civic life.<sup>47</sup> In this discourse, the barbarians did not live in cities but in sparse villages composed of isolated houses<sup>48</sup> and were culturally unsophisticated, socially incapable of self-discipline, and quite possibly ungovernable.<sup>49</sup> Yet these weaknesses, obvious from a Roman horizon, were also strengths, because the apparent wildness could be understood as a primordial form of freedom. The tribal members feared nothing more than enslavement and fought to the death to retain their status as free men.<sup>50</sup> The barbarians would never willingly yield to a foreign ruler, and as virile warriors, uncorrupted by the temptations of civilization, they refused to transfer the duty of military defense to professionalized contingents.<sup>51</sup> This defiant barbarity, tied to a life in the forest rather than urban centers, was synonymous with resistance to governance by some centralized power, however competent and beneficial; tribes embodied a primeval demand for self-governance. In *The History of the German Language*, Jacob Grimm extended this tradition and claimed that the indomitable Germanic tribesmen had challenged the declining Roman Empire.<sup>52</sup>

Grimm also preserved the ambiguity of barbarian wildness, which connoted both lack of self-restraint and irrepressible dynamism; the Germanic migrations were a "violent eruption [*heftiger ausbruch*]" that nonetheless testified to the barbarians' courage and proud spirit.<sup>53</sup> In a peculiar attempt to identify the barbarian ethos in the tendencies of linguistic development, Grimm even asserted that the second sound shift,

which differentiated the High German tongue from other Germanic languages, exhibited the adventurousness of the “vanguard” high-German tribes.<sup>54</sup> Yet he also associated the sound shifts, the documentation and schematization of which had made him famous as a grammarian, with a certain lack of control; even if sounds organized themselves in new ways, they had for a moment become completely “unsettled.”<sup>55</sup> In a speculative vein, Grimm suggested an analogy between tribal unruliness and phonetic transformation: “in a certain way, phonetic shifts appear to me as a kind of barbarism and descent into wildness, which other, calmer peoples would have resisted . . . even in the innermost sounds of their language they [the Germans] pushed forward.”<sup>56</sup> Going from “tooth” to “Zahn” had been, Grimm suggested, an expression of dynamism and explosiveness; he embraced the classical, Tacitean image of barbarism and transported it into his linguistic analysis.

Yet Grimm did not argue for a politics somehow modeled on tribal life or a collective return to its virtues. While his accumulated materials conveyed his deep fascination for an archaic age shimmering forth in the words of ancient Germanic languages, he did not offer his findings to the public as parts of a directly applicable political agenda for his own day. The tribe or clan was not, for Grimm, a model of immediate relevance as a form of human organization, the “general assembly of [German] warriors”<sup>57</sup> not a prefiguration of more democratic order. In Tacitus’s *Germania*, the tribes possessed their own leadership structures and procedures for making collective decisions. Tacitus portrayed regularized bonds of loyalty and gift giving between chieftains and retainers as well as recurrent assemblies of weapon-bearing men who settled legal and political matters of collective import.<sup>58</sup> Peers of Grimm such as the constitutional historian Georg Waitz (1813–86) even argued that the system of limited monarchy had roots in a particularly Germanic conception of kingship reconciled with popular freedom and public election by acclamation.<sup>59</sup> Grimm made no such arguments. *The History of the German Language* simply did not focus on fundamental questions such as the right form of government, the election of leaders, the just distribution of goods, or any other issue commonly associated with political thought. It was precisely what it declared to be: a historical tableau of “collective origin.”<sup>60</sup> To Grimm, the diachronic depth of the German community, its sheer continuousness as a linguistically specifiable cluster of groups, was the supreme political or rather pre-political fact. Whether or not the community should be ruled as a monarchy, republic, or democracy mattered less than that it should enter politics as an already extant national body whose outlines were most

expertly traced by the philologist. The German people arrived to contemporary politics as a unit that should never be sliced or torn apart by elites who waged wars, conducted negotiations, and signed treaties. Its already existing cohesion simply constituted the ultimate reality for politics, the inescapable anthropological foundation of *any* contemporary order.

In his eager efforts to validate German unity by means of an excavation of tribal history, Grimm thus bracketed questions of political forms, but the ultimate results of this philological search for indigeneity, contemporary critics of nineteenth-century nationalist scholarship have asserted, were altogether spurious. To begin with, the ungoverned, undomesticated, and uncaptured<sup>61</sup> Germanic tribes that Grimm described had all been characterized as such by imperial observers and hence from within civilization, the world of Roman city life;<sup>62</sup> the major sources on barbarian origins, customs, deeds, settlement, migration, and political organization were Roman or Latin. “[A] people exists,” one modern-day scholar writes, “when the literate world takes notice of it” and in the case of the Germanic barbarians, it was the Romans who took notice of them.<sup>63</sup> Most influential was, again, Tacitus’s *Germania*, but ethnographic scholars also consulted the geography by the Greco-Roman Claudius Ptolemy, Julius Caesar’s work on the Gallic wars, and Jordanes’s history of the Goths.<sup>64</sup> For an exclusively textual scholar such as Grimm, with no access to an archaeological record, knowledge of barbarian history relied on non-barbarian sources. Such sources, one should add, were frequently unreliable: “[I]f Cornelius Tacitus was ever on the Rhine,” one contemporary classicist states, “he discloses no sign of it in the *Germania*.”<sup>65</sup>

Present-day scholars have furthered questioned whether Germanic groups really existed as pre-constituted, natural communities merely registered by literate witnesses, or whether they instead reflect imperial attempts to give some shape to culturally fluid crowds of people at the northern borders.<sup>66</sup> Caesar’s division of Celts and Germans into separate ethnic macro-groups was not, scholars suggest, made with linguistic and cultural differences in mind; it was a distinction between potentially civilized and uncivilized groups drawn for political and military purposes.<sup>67</sup> Those barbaric peoples, the historian Patrick Geary has claimed, likely also assembled for the first time in the Roman borderlands and did not arrive to the empire already constituted elsewhere. When groups launched attacks on the imperial armies or attempted to break into more prosperous areas, they were quite often confederations or alliances among disparate communities brought together for military and political ends and coalescing around a rising leader.<sup>68</sup> Units crystallized through interactions at the

imperial edges rather than reaching it fully formed; ethnogenesis itself was partly a border phenomenon. Along the same lines, the agrarian historian James Scott argues that state and non-state peoples always related to one another and indeed coevolved. Non-state peoples congregated at the frontiers of much wealthier states to supply slaves, cattle, and fur in exchange for artisanal and luxury goods – or built alliances to plunder their wealthier neighbors.<sup>69</sup> This continually developing complementarity leads Scott to reverse the temporal order of the civilized state and the barbarian tribe. Grimm and his peers may have thought of tribes as primeval units, but early states, Scott claims, typically generated so-called barbarians around them. The tribes recorded in the Roman sources were not clumps of pure primordality but shaped and even constituted in an ongoing relationship with the empire.

The interaction between Romans and barbarians was clear to many nineteenth-century scholars. In his 1825 account of the German people, the historian Heinrich Luden stated that the division of Germans into tribes could reflect “particularities [*Eigentümlichkeiten*]<sup>70</sup> and thus have some grounding in a cultural and ethnic reality, but he conceded that the identification of units according to some distinctive feature likely satisfied a need for clarity and overview in the confusing mass of barbarians, a need he attributed to the scholar but also the Roman imperial observer. The surviving designations and descriptions could therefore not be presumed to match actual barbarian communities and their forms of life. For a historian of the German people, this situation was a cause of frustration. Luden noted that tribes were mentioned in Latin texts but were not characterized at any length and sometimes seemed to vanish as quickly as they made an appearance,<sup>71</sup> and he even expressed doubts about the tribal names as sources of any meaningful, verifiable knowledge.<sup>72</sup> The sheer multiplicity of groups seemed to suggest that the late Roman Empire had not really confronted a single undefeatable Germanic enemy, but something more like a “dust cloud of fragmented peoples of varying ethnicities.”<sup>73</sup>

As we shall see, even Jacob Grimm quietly acknowledged the elusiveness of the barbarians and the overreliance on outside, imperial sources. He admitted that he never quite had access to the barbarian tribe directly and hinted at the implications of this awkward fact, primarily in his recurring reflections on the names of the barbarian tribes. For Grimm, too, the names of ethnic groups were not enduring emblems of tribal self-assertion but rather relics of encounters; they testified to past interactions *between* communities close to the imperial realm rather than the spontaneous self-expression of any Germanic ancestors. Even in Grimm’s nationalist work,

the purely indigenous Germanic tribes tended to recede from view in the course of the philological investigation. His programmatic turn to the Germanic tribe revealed itself to be a turn to the imperial space in which they had first appeared.

### The Names of the Barbarians

Grimm's analyses of names and their origins and meanings took up a very large part of most of his chapters on individual tribes, sometimes because little else was known about those tribes and their languages other than their names.<sup>74</sup> For Grimm, the names were an important source of information – and sometimes the only source. The Marcomanni, to pick one example, meant “border people,” *marka* being a word for frontier or border and *manni* a word for men. Grimm pointed out that this name likely designated a tribe that lived in the vicinity of other, alien peoples, perhaps close to large forests, since forests separated peoples from one another.<sup>75</sup> Sometimes, such linguistic discussions of the meaning and origins of names even made up the bulk of entire chapters. Grimm's chapter on the Franks opened with a brief paragraph on the historical appearance and mighty reputation of the tribe but then immediately launched into an explanation of the meaning of the name; *Frank*, Grimm stated, meant free. Yet he continued the discussion of alternative derivations for about six pages,<sup>76</sup> after which he moved on to another tribal name, the Sigambren, and its possible context of origin and meanings. Could not the heroic names of Sigi, Sigmund, and Sigfried, Grimm wondered, be related to the name of the Sigambren?<sup>77</sup> A chain of further tribes was then introduced toward the end of the chapter, such as the Usipeten, Tencterer, and Bructerer, but Grimm reported that very little or nothing was known about these peoples; only their names had survived.<sup>78</sup> This lack of information was nothing unusual. From the language of the Vandals, Grimm wrote, nothing remained but Vandal names, and of course the name of the tribe itself.<sup>79</sup>

Sometimes Grimm sought to decode these names with the aid of his grammatical knowledge, such as his table of Germanic sound shifts. The tribe that Roman sources called Chatten, he claimed, could be continuous with the Hazzi or the Hessians, the people of Grimm's home region in Germany; *Ch* (as in Chatten) had turned into *H*, and *TT* into *ZZ* and *SS*.<sup>80</sup> At other times, it is a little harder to follow Grimm as he associated various names and peoples with one another and located them in particular landscapes and regions, surrounded by neighboring groups. The Rhoxolani, according to the Greek and Roman sources, were a Sarmatian people or

a Scythian tribe, each considered Eurasian or Iranian. Grimm reviewed the available ancient documents, such as texts by Strabo and Jordanes, which placed the warring Rhoxolani outside of the Roman Empire, in close contact with Germanic peoples. Then he added that Finns call Swedes Ruotsalainen, Estonians call them Roostlane, and the Norwegian sami used the name Ruotteladzh, similarities that he believed may point to some identity between peoples at the eastern and northern periphery of Europe.<sup>81</sup> Grimm clearly delighted in association and speculation, linking seemingly floating names to present-day peoples and countries.

As revealed by these samples, *The History of the German Language* did not conceal that little remained of the barbarian tribes beyond their names, nor did it deny that those names had mostly been recorded in non-barbarian Roman sources. For a linguist like Grimm happily focused on minutiae, the presence of the names of Germanic tribes and not much else even seems to have stimulated rather than constrained scholarly productivity. The Grimm biographer Ulrich Wyss views *The History of the German Language* as an account of the exhilarating pursuit of minimal clues about numerous tribal communities now forever lost. To illustrate the arcane quality of the book and its taste for the recondite and the exotic, Wyss lists some of the lesser-known tribes that Grimm introduced in his book: “Bastarnen, Gepiden, Skiren . . . Rugiern, Herulern, Avionen, Alanen, Hunen, Vandalen, Semnonen, Triboken, Nemeten, Vangionen, Armilausi, Markomannen, Quaden, Sigambern, Gugernen, Ubiern, Chamavanen, Bructerern, Tencterern, Usipeten, Batten, Canninefaten, Tubanten, Hermunduren, Marsen, Dulgubinen, Angariern, Haruden, Sturmaren, Ambronon, Chauken, Langobarden, Burgunden, Mugilonen, Buren, Navarnahalen, Victohalen, Reudingen, Suardonen, Aestiern, Guttonen, Gothinen, Tectosagen, Roxolanen.”<sup>82</sup> There were myriad tribes, many of whom remained very elusive, as all that had really survived of them were the tribal names.

Since names constituted perhaps the central material of his work, Grimm early on provided a general discussion of their typical sources and function. In line with his etymological interests, he first clarified that name, or the German *Name*, derived from the verb *nehmen*, “to take,” originally signified that which had been received as a gift.<sup>83</sup> As a rule, Grimm pointed out, people do not give themselves names: “nobody attaches a name to himself, but it is attached to him by others [*keiner legt sich seinen namen selbst bei, sondern er wird ihm von andern beigelegt*].”<sup>84</sup> This was true for individuals, who were given their names by parents or relatives, but also of collectives. Each community, Grimm believed, was typically named by other, neighboring ones.<sup>85</sup> The urge to name another group, he asserted, was even

stronger than the need to give oneself a name; every tribe named those whom they encountered and ended up named by them.<sup>86</sup>

Grimm returned to these initial arguments, first presented in the long section on the laws and customs of ancient peoples, in the chapter on “Germanic Peoples and Germans [*Germanen und Deutsche*],” the very final segment in the book and one of obvious, overarching importance. Discussing the “names of peoples [*volksnamen*],” he reiterated the core idea that no ancient people had named itself but rather had received its name from others, ethnically affiliated or more “alien [*fremde*]” neighbors<sup>87</sup> and then suggested three principal sources for those who named others: names were given with reference to an ancestor or heroic figure, a salient feature of the people as a whole, or finally the place and landscape with which they were associated, although such names did not seem very suitable for roaming barbarian tribes. Examples of each category followed, with a slight emphasis on names that encapsulated some prominent property, either with regard to the people’s appearance or their character. The name *Langobard* (Lombards) referred to the long beards of that people,<sup>88</sup> whereas *Friesen* (Frisians) pointed to the people’s status as free from the domination of others.<sup>89</sup> A name such as the latter, Grimm added, was a mark of honor; it testified to the admiring recognition of those who had encountered the tribe.

Grimm clearly held that the tribal names he gathered and interpreted were never generated from within the communities themselves but rather attached to them by observing others. There were few or no proud acts of autonomous self-naming. As a consequence, the surviving names may often have come from a dialect or even a language not spoken by the tribes themselves, but from the language of a neighbor or even an imperial power. The Bavarians, for instance, were a Germanic people, but the name was of Celtic origin.<sup>90</sup> Grimm’s reasoning even led him to an unexpected conclusion: the one word with which the tribe was most intimately associated, and in some cases the *only* word that had survived its historical disappearance, did not typically belong to its dialect or native tongue. The inference might seem peculiar, but some of Grimm’s contemporaries arrived at a similar conclusion. In his book on the Germans and their neighboring tribes, Grimm’s fellow philologist Johann Kaspar Zeuss stated that peoples did not name themselves in their own language, at least with regard to the names for bundles of related tribes, such as the Celts, Germans, Wends, or Slavs.<sup>91</sup> Historians knew tribes by the names given to them by others, in tongues only half-known or possibly alien to those tribes themselves, and in many cases scholars had almost nothing beyond precisely those names.



Grimm thus knew that the names could not be taken as vehicles of barbarian self-expression but represented the attempts of other groups to name a foreign community, attempts then recorded in non-barbarian Roman sources intended to bring order into a confusing ethnic terrain. The name of any tribe did not reveal to him the tribe itself in its immediacy; it was a designation from the outside, a mark of an encounter, typically picked up by interested imperial authors and preserved in a text. Grimm himself even explored how the medieval literary record consisted of traces of past cultural confrontations that had a distorting or mythologizing effect on the appearance of peoples. While most chapter titles of *The History of the German Language* pointed either to grammatical features such as sound shifts or weak verbs or tribes such as the Goths or the Franks, a late chapter, the twenty-seventh, stood out: its topic and also its title was *die edda*, by which Grimm referred both to the Icelander Snorri Sturluson's medieval prose work on Norse mythology and the older collection of Norse poetry with mythic content.<sup>92</sup> Grimm deemed these texts to be singular works, which described the system of pagan belief in a highly credible way.<sup>93</sup> Yet their greatness alone did not warrant their inclusion in *The History of the German Language* as the only literary works to receive any treatment in a book on linguistics. Grimm turned to the *Eddas* because they vividly confirmed his intuition that ancient peoples emerged in the eyes of others and were named by them. Behind the medieval Norse depiction of a mythological universe with dwarfs and giants, each with its own characteristics – the dwarves were nifty yet unreliable, the giants lumpish and reckless but also loyal and sensible<sup>94</sup> – Grimm detected stories of confrontations between Germanic peoples and a series of alien others, such as Finns, Sami, and Sorbs. In the tales of dwarfs and giants, he claimed, one could discern “marginalized, old inhabitants of the land who retreat before the immigrating tribe [*zurückgedrängte, vor dem einwandernden stamm ... weichende alte landeinwohner*].”<sup>95</sup> The mythological sources presented transformed versions of cultural encounters with unknown and intermittently hostile groups; the Norse myths revealed an ancient history of interethnic confrontations.

In the *Eddas*, Grimm thus believed he had found Germanic observations of other peoples and the attempt to name them and characterize them in ways that were obviously imaginative, creative, at times even grotesque. He did not explicitly infer from this that the Roman texts he mined for information about Germanic tribes were similarly fantastical, but they were. (In *Germania*, Tacitus reported that behind the barbarians, among groups living even farther away from the Roman border, one would find monstrous human-animal hybrids.<sup>96</sup>) When Grimm set out to dig as

deeply as he could into the available sources about Germanic peoples, he found a linguistic and literary history of cultural encounters in which tribes and ethnic groups appeared through the eyes of others, in the idioms and languages of others, named and portrayed elusively through guesswork, projections, and fantastical storytelling. Grimm confidently introduced the barbarian tribes as the validating ancestors of a unified Germany, but he implicitly acknowledged that ancient peoples mostly emerged in fictional narratives about past cultural confrontations, as experienced and encapsulated by others. The Germanic tribes had been seen and imagined from the outside rather than the inside.

The work that Grimm considered the joyously written summation of his career as well as a scholarly case for German unity was partly, one could say, about the challenges and limits of philology. Grimm admitted that he did not have an account of the internal constitution and habits of the Germanic tribes so much as an account of encounters among groups, and that he did not possess a genuine record of the tribes left behind by themselves so much as the fragmentary, frequently unreliable, and even extravagant testimonies of strangers. The tribal units invoked by Grimm to anchor the nation in an ancient history never spoke for themselves but were instead instruments or even fictions of foreign observers. The delineation of peoples, already implicit in the acts of naming and the characterizations, was often performed from the vantage point of the city with its non-tribal, civic life. Who, then, was the philologist, the researcher with the task of tracing the contours of tribally rooted peoples to deliver bounded nations to the world of contemporary politics? Removed from the tribe in time, forced to rely on non-barbarian sources, attending to names that expressed not the groups themselves but were given by their neighbors or enemies, the philologist himself seemed constantly to slip into the position of an external observer. In fact, Grimm took one further step in his discussion of his materials and methods by implying that philology itself was a discipline born of empire. The philologist did not just rely on imperial sources; the guardian of nationhood was unthinkable without the long history of non-national, alien rule.

### **Imperial Knowledge**

Jacob Grimm claimed with great seriousness that German philologists would be especially successful if they dedicated themselves to Germanic languages and literatures. A German national would arrive at the most perceptive and profound insights, he believed, when working on

documents in his own language, because of the greater interpretive availability of native materials over foreign ones: “We naturally rely on our fatherland,” Grimm claimed at the 1846 Germanist convention, “and with the gifts that we have inherited, there is nothing that we can learn to grasp as securely and profoundly [*auf das vaterland sind wir von natur gewiesen und nichts anderes vermögen wir mit unsern angeborenen gaben in solchen maasse und so sicher begreifen zu lernen*].”<sup>97</sup> Everyone was born into and immersed in one specific culture, and the inescapable socialization predisposed the scholar to grasp the historical products of his or her own culture more intimately than those of others. Just as the human mind could more easily penetrate the products of humanity than the mute objects of nature, Grimm thought, artifacts from one’s own nation were more easily and authentically understood than those from other cultural realms. Speaking to his peers gathered at the conference of Germanists in Frankfurt, Grimm put this point in martial vocabulary: “the human in language, literature, law, and history is closer to our hearts than animals, plants, and elements; with those same weapons, the national triumphs over the foreign [*mit denselben waffen siegt das nationale über das fremde*].”<sup>98</sup>

Grimm’s insistence on the importance of cultural closeness was meant to shift scholarly attention away from the traditionally revered classical culture to the hidden and misunderstood greatness of the vernacular and the national. An anecdote told by the poet August Heinrich Hoffmann von Fallersleben (1798–1874) captures this desired reorientation toward the German. Fallersleben is now probably most known, if known at all, as the author of Germany’s national anthem,<sup>99</sup> but he was also a prolific scholar of Germanic literature. As a young classicist, he visited the city of Kassel to inspect antique sculptures in its museum, built with funds from the profitable business with Hessian military contingents. While in Kassel, Fallersleben encountered Jacob Grimm and reported that the older Grimm brother asked him a question that made him abandon classical studies and devote himself to the study of the Germanic languages and literatures. The simple but consequential question, put by Jacob Grimm, read: “but is not your fatherland closer to you [than Italy and Greece] [*Liegt Ihnen Ihr Vaterland nicht näher*]?”<sup>100</sup> By posing this question, Grimm did not dispute the beauty of the artifacts Fallersleben wished to see or the greatness of the classical tradition, but the choice of an object of study, the older scholar suggested, should not be determined by the attraction of aesthetic excellence. What mattered instead was one’s closeness to the subject matter. The particular construction of closeness that Grimm sought to promote was of course national belonging. Only a nationally grounded

intimacy with the object of scholarly attention could incite the necessary passion and motivation as well as ensure the greatest possible hermeneutic access. The German-born philologist should, Grimm believed, always first consider becoming a Germanist.

The central claim of Grimm's philological politics was that the philologist alone could accurately trace the contours of the people and hence supply modern politics with a much-needed unit of legitimate rule. Grimm's statements on the particular proximity of the German scholar to German materials might seem to suggest that the philologist would also be able to discern the substance and the outlines of his *own* nation better than anyone else, since he could perceive the culture and its boundaries most clearly. The German philologist, Grimm would then be suggesting, was especially close to the German nation, knew the German language and culture better than anyone else, and could also speak about its borders with the greatest authority.

In *The History of the German Language*, however, Grimm did not make this claim. In his own exploration of tribal history on the basis of the fragmentary linguistic record, he showed that the character and contours of each tribe were in some way always surmised from an external vantage point. He admitted, at least implicitly, that the ancient Germanic tribe was something of a fantastical beast, often spotted or imagined from inside the city to which the barbarians themselves did not belong. The name of a tribe had never been triumphantly called out from within the community, there had been no or few acts of autonomous self-designation, and all the philologist could do was try to decode the labels affixed to tribes and peoples by neighbors and hegemony, admirers and enemies.

In Grimm's view, the philologist was the one who could best disentangle peoples so that they could begin their separate political futures. Judging by the argument in *The History of the German Language*, however, this figure did not simply belong to one nation and one nation only but inhabited an implicitly imperial position, since he hovered above several peoples, studied them, learned their names from imperial sources, and necessarily observed them from some cultural distance. Grimm made the imperial character of the philologist most apparent in his discussion of the origins of comparative grammar, the disciplinary tool that in his view helped him distinguish peoples from one another and ultimately allowed him to envision a future geopolitical space on the basis of an appreciation of systematic linguistic differences. *The History of the German Language* asserted that the methodically acquired knowledge of multiple languages had only become historically possible within an empire, even within the

realm of “world domination [*weltherrschaft*].”<sup>101</sup> It was the Romans, Grimm wrote in his ethnic history, who had possessed the “richest material for linguistic comparison [*das reichhaltigste material zu sprachvergleichen*]” thanks to their contact with captured kings, priests, and warriors and subordination of entire foreign peoples, although they failed to develop modern comparative grammar.<sup>102</sup> If the Romans had never moved linguistics forward despite their domination of defeated tribes and assimilation of disparate territories, another empire had facilitated precisely that achievement. In an essay from 1851, some three years after the completion of *The History of the German Language*, Grimm pointed to the origin of comparative grammar in the British Empire.<sup>103</sup> He did not mention William Jones by name, the imperial judge and scholar who discovered patterns of similarity across Sanskrit, Greek, and Latin and conceived of “Eastern” poetry as strongly expressive rather than mimetic.<sup>104</sup> He did, however, point out that British rule of India – *die herschaft [sic] der Briten* – allowed for comparisons that laid the foundations for the science of language as he knew it.<sup>105</sup> Modern empire building, and hence “domination” or “rule” far across national lines, established the conditions for the study of multiple expressive cultural traditions of poetry as well as the subtle laws of language as they operated in diverse tongues.<sup>106</sup> Nonclassical literary studies and comparative grammar had, according to Grimm, unmistakably imperial origins.

In Grimm’s mature view, the philologist could sort out peoples and tongues, divide them with precision, and produce a map of nations for a more stable, just, and peaceful order, in which conationals were assembled rather than internally divided or dominated from abroad. In this envisioned geopolitical order, like would finally rule over like, kings belong to peoples. Yet philology as a discipline depended, as Grimm acknowledged, on the possibility of transcending the single community of the nation and conducting comparisons of several languages and traditions of poetry. For Grimm, the philologist’s very existence implied an international dimension above nationhood, from which the distinctiveness of each nation could be studied and understood. This dimension had, Grimm added, historically been the imperial expanse. The philologist did not belong to the nation, but had appeared in the realm of the empire thanks to a position of dominance and management in a multinational, multiethnic, and multilingual domain.

More than most scholars, Jacob Grimm contributed to the transfer of value from the classical languages to vernaculars and strengthened the idea

that linguistic and cultural distinctions among those vernaculars were coterminous with the outlines of national communities. In Grimm's hands, comparative philology and literary studies turned into political instruments that could help create an order of nation-states. In the conception of Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, the philologist was even tasked with the heroic mission of redeeming and revivifying the slumbering voices of the nation, releasing them into the present, and reclaiming the nationally defined people from the grip of autocrats and imperialists, from arrogant and ignorant regimes. At the same time, Grimm did not deny that philological work was completely dependent on comparative analyses of multiple languages and traditions, and that the polyethnic empire had been philology's condition of possibility. Crucial philological sources and tools had emerged through a distinctly imperial awareness of multiple peoples, multiple languages and their interrelations. When Grimm sought to find his way to the core and origin of German being, the ancient tribe as a purely indigenous community, he found himself in the position of an outside observer, even an imperial one.