

CHAPTER 10

'WALTHARIUS': TREASURE, REVENGE AND KINGSHIP IN THE OTTONIAN WILD WEST

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Those of us who make a living researching the post-Roman world of the Franks do not, give or take a Gregory of Tours, spend our days reading texts quite as complex or interesting as Bill Miller's Icelandic sagas. As fascinating as they are as historical sources, few would claim that the dry pages of the *Royal Frankish Annals* or even Einhard's *Life of Charlemagne* should be considered classics of world literature. The Latin epic poem *Waltharius* is, however, something different from the Frankish norm. It is a psychologically complicated story about greed, revenge, and the etiquette of violence. Set in the age of Attila the Hun, its story is built around the conflicting loyalties of three protagonists, none of whom emerges unharmed either morally or physically. The poet's black humour, his sharp appreciation of secular aristocratic culture, and his refusal to offer up a clean resolution call to mind the world of Njal and Egil as much as the straight-faced Christian chronicles of the ninth and tenth centuries. The text was popular in its own time, finding numerous known readers and copyists from the late tenth century until the thirteenth. Related stories of Walter's exploits spread widely, turning up in epics and poems including the *Nibelungenlied*, the Old English *Waldere*, and the *Song of Roland*. Eventually, Walter even made it into the Old Norse tradition via the stories collected by the author of

Thidrekssaga.¹ The text and manuscripts of *Waltharius* have proved no less fascinating to modern historians and philologists, inspiring hundreds of scholarly studies since the poem was first edited by Jacob Grimm in 1838, and especially since the appearance of the standard edition by Karl Strecker in 1951.² Many of these studies deal with the vexed question of authorship. In this article I will approach authorship via a question about readership: what might the poem have meant to its first known reader, the tenth-century bishop of Strasbourg to whom the earliest version of the poem is dedicated? I will emphasise two key themes, inspired by a reading of Miller's work on the sagas: the poet's depiction of the Vosges, where most of the action is set, and the role played in the text by treasure and gifts. First, however, we need an outline of the poem and theories on its authorship.

Poem and Poet

The poem, which comes in at just under 1500 lines, is set in a pseudo-historical version of fifth-century Europe. It has three main sections. In the first, Attila the Hun leads his armies across the Rhine and extorts tribute and hostages from the kings of the Franks, Burgundians, and

¹ P. Dronke, 'Waltharius—Gaiferos', in Dronke, *Latin and Vernacular Poets of the Middle Ages* (Aldershot: 1996), 29 – 79. For reasons of space I will not be able to cite more than a small sample of *Waltharius* scholarship.

² *Waltharius*, ed. K. Strecker, in *Der Lateinischen Dichter des deutschen Mittelalters* (Weimar: 1951), 1 – 85. A more recent edition and English translation is provided by D.M. Kratz (ed. and trans.), *Waltharius and Ruodlieb* (New York: 1984). I will cite the poem by line numbers only, which are the same in both editions. Translations are based on Kratz.

Aquitanians. The hostages, Hagen, Hildegund, and Walter respectively, gradually rise to high positions at the Hunnic court, and Walter becomes the leader of the army and its most feared warrior. When news arrives that the Frankish king Gibicho has died, and that his son Gunther has broken his father's peace treaty with Attila, Hagen flees. Walter and Hildegund, now betrothed, follow him some time later after getting the Huns drunk at a banquet. They bring with them two coffers of treasure, about which Attila is not best pleased. The poem's second section follows Walter and Hildegund as they travel through the Frankish kingdom. Gunther catches wind of them as they pass through the royal city of Worms, and works out that they are carrying treasure from Attila's court. The king is greedy for the gold and, despite the protestations of Hagen, takes twelve warriors to track down the fugitives in the forested hills of the Vosges. When they find Walter, he is barricaded into a gorge or cleft in the hills, which means the warriors have to take him on one at a time. Walter lives up to his reputation as a saga-style killing machine and takes out each of the champions in a series of gory encounters enlivened by threats and accusations. Each of these is described with some relish. In the third act, Gunther (maliciously) and Hagen (reluctantly) lure Walter into the open and engage in the final battle, after which all three are left graphically mutilated but alive. Gunther is too badly injured to speak, but the other two share some wine and joke about their wounds (Hagen has lost an eye, Walter a hand) before departing for home. Hagen carries the very ill Gunther back to Worms, while Walter and Hildegund go back to Aquitaine to reign for thirty years.

The poet may not have been inventing the story as a pure act of imagination: to judge by diverse references to him in a variety of later sources, Walter had an independent life in numerous oral traditions. Nonetheless, the Latin *Waltharius* (which is our earliest witness to the Walter tradition) was not simply a repository of orally transmitted tales but a carefully composed

work in its own right, deeply influenced by patristic writings and classical epics such as Virgil's *Aeneid*. It was also treated as a complete work by medieval readers and copyists. For example, the eleventh-century Italian monk who incorporated *Waltharius* into his eccentric history of the monastery of Noalesa bent the poem to his own purposes by careful epitomisation, but in a way that nonetheless respected the original structure and content of the work.³

Scholarship on the poem has long been dominated by questions about its genre: how should we understand such a superficially profane work as the product of a profoundly Christian literary culture? Could a clerical audience really appreciate a story about the deeds of a hero who kills eleven men in a variety of inventive ways (including four by decapitation)? How did the author balance Classical, Christian, and 'Germanic' elements? Debates over such questions have generated many valuable insights about the way the poet used, interacted with, and perhaps even parodied the pagan epics by which he was inspired or repelled.⁴ But the problem with this line of analysis is that the categories it deals in were inextricably linked elements of early medieval culture, to the point of being indistinguishable. The notion of the 'Germanic' as a cultural

³ *Chronicon Novaliciense*, ed. L. Bethmann, MGH SS 7 (Hanover: 1846), 2.7 – 12, 85 – 94; A. Bisanti, 'La leggenda di Walthario e i distici "Vualtarius fortis" nel "Chronicon Novaliciense"', *Bollettino di Studi Latini* 40 (2010), 76 – 85.

⁴ D.M. Kratz, *Mocking Epic: Waltharius, Alexandreis and the Problem of Christian Heroism* (Madrid: 1980); C. Ratkowitsch, 'O vortex mundi, fames, insatiatus, habendi, gurges avaritiae. Das *Waltharius*-Epos zwischenaltgermanischem Sagenstoff, Vergils Aeneis und christlicher Moral', *Mittellateinisches Jahrbuch* 51 (2016), 1 – 38.

category is highly contestable, as is the notion of a sharp distinction between the tastes and perspectives of religious and lay aristocrats. Apart from anything else, we know that stories from mythical heroic pasts were widely enjoyed in early medieval monasteries—otherwise they would not have survived to the present day.⁵ And, as Rachel Stone has shown, the violent excesses of *Waltharius* cannot be interpreted as a parody of lay conduct because they are wholly consistent with the much more laconic descriptions of aristocratic atrocity and violence found in Carolingian annals (which were also written by churchmen).⁶ As with the Icelandic sagas, then, we are entitled to read *Waltharius* as an artefact of its era – a source for the tastes and social assumptions of the time in which it was written rather than a staging point on the road from antiquity to some ‘fully Christianised’ future.⁷

⁵ P. Wormald, ‘Bede, Beowulf and the Conversion of the Anglo-Saxon Aristocracy’, in *Bede and Anglo-Saxon England*, ed. R.T. Farrell (Oxford: 1978), 32 – 95.

⁶ R. Stone, ‘Waltharius and Carolingian Morality: Satire and Lay Values’, *Early Medieval Europe* 21 (2013), 50 – 70. Stone’s argument would be equally applicable to the post-Carolingian period: see e.g. the straight-faced account of prisoners being beheaded and mutilated in Widukind, *Rerum Gestarum Saxoniarum Libri Tres*, ed. P. Hirsch (Hanover: 1935), 3.55, 134 – 35. This text is translated in B. Bachrach and D. Bachrach, *Deeds of the Saxons* (Washington, DC: 2014).

⁷ W.I. Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking: Feud, Law, and Society in Saga Iceland* (Chicago and London: 1990), 44 – 51.

But to which era did it belong? Dating the poem is, like dating Einhard's *Life of Charlemagne*, one of the great parlour games of early medieval historiography. The old consensus, that it was written by a monk of St-Gall in the 920s and revised a century later, was tenuously based on an enigmatic passage in Ekkehard IV's eleventh-century *Casus Sancti Galli* and is now generally rejected as incompatible with the manuscript evidence.⁸ Most recent opinion has preferred to locate the work in the rich textual environment of the Carolingian Renaissance. Via claims that poem shares a 'similar poetic energy' to other works of the earlier ninth century, and emphasising the poet's evident familiarity with the work of the Carolingian writer Walahfrid Strabo, much effort has been expended to make the poem fit the court circles of Charlemagne (d. 814) or Louis the Pious (d. 840).⁹ More recently still, *Waltharius* has been read as a kind of allegory of late Carolingian politics, an admonition about the chaos that could result from conflicts between friends and allies which was especially pertinent in the years after the

⁸ A.M. Turcan-Verkerk, 'Langue et littérature latines du Moyen Âge', *Annuaire de l'École pratique des hautes études, section des sciences historiques et philologiques* 146 (2015), 122 – 33 summarises and evaluates the various theories.

⁹ R. Schieffer, 'Zu neuen Thesen über den Waltharius', *Deutsches Archiv für Erforschung des Mittelalters* 36 (1980), 193 – 201 critiques the early Carolingian argument. 'Similar poetic energy': Dronke, 'Waltharius', 77.

civil wars among the sons of Louis the Pious in the early 840s.¹⁰ These arguments are worthy of much more serious consideration than is possible here, but the reason that all (including those made in this article) are unprovable on textual grounds is that the direction of influence between the poem and the ninth- and early tenth-century works it seems to cite is impossible to determine with certainty.¹¹

One major obstacle for a Carolingian dating is the fact that some of the manuscripts—including the earliest—carry a preface by a certain Gerald, who dedicates the poem to a bishop called Erchanbald. Walter Berschin has convincingly identified this bishop, via comparisons to other poems and dedications written in his circle, as Erchanbald of Strasbourg (965-91).¹² Because this presents a problem to both of the most common theories about the poem's context (tenth-century St-Gall and the Carolingian Renaissance), the preface is commonly explained away as the work of a copyist, especially as the Latin does not match the main body of the poem. The preface was, however, a kind of acrostic encoding a hidden message in praise of God and

¹⁰ A. Rio, 'Waltharius at Fontenoy? Epic Heroism and Carolingian Political Thought', *Viator* 46 (2015), 41 – 64; A.M. Turcan-Verkerk, 'La diffusion du *Waltharius* et son anonymat: Essai d'interprétation', *Filologia Mediolatina* 23 (2016), 59 – 122.

¹¹ B. Vollmann, 'Gesta Berengarii und Waltharius-Epos', *Deutsches Archiv für Erforschung des Mittelalters* 61 (2005), 161 – 4.

¹² W. Berschin, 'Erchanbald von Straßburg (965-991)', *Zeitschrift für die Geschichte des Oberrheins* 134 (1986), 1 – 20; accepted by e.g. Turcan-Verkerk, 'Langue et littérature'.

should not therefore be expected to resemble the Virgilian hexameters that follow.¹³ Gerald also seems to claim the work as his, describing it as 'my *libellus*' and the product of his own 'long effort'—a peculiar thing for a mere copyist to say.¹⁴ The connection with Erchanbald is in any case circumstantially strong. In the preface, Gerald asks his reader to remember him as his 'dear Adelphus'. This is apparently a pun on 'dear *amicus* [friend]' and seems to be a knowing reference to St Adelphus, whose cult at nearby Neuweiler was actively promoted by the bishops of Strasbourg in the tenth century.¹⁵ Erchanbald was originally from Swabia, which would explain why someone in his entourage was so familiar with the work of the Reichenau poet Walahfrid. He also had close links to the Swabian monastery of St-Gall, from where he recruited scholars to Strasbourg, and it may or may not be a coincidence that the leader of the St-Gall school until about 970 was a man called Gerald.¹⁶ The poem itself is largely set in Alsace, whose main ecclesiastical centre was Strasbourg. Moreover, the manuscript transmission seems to begin

¹³ H. Haefele, 'Geraldus-Lektüre', *Deutsches Archiv für Erforschung des Mittelalters* 54 (1998), 1 – 21 (together with the additional note by G. Silagi at 119 – 20).

¹⁴ *Waltharius*, preface, v. 9 – 16.

¹⁵ M. Tischler, 'Die Gorzer Reform in Neuweiler bei Zabern an der Schwelle zum XI. Jahrhundert. Beobachtungen zu einigen Handschriftenfunden', [Archives de l'Eglise d'Alsace](#) 51 (1993/94), 69-90, at 73.

¹⁶ K. Langosch, *Waltharius: Die Dichtung und die Forschung* (Darmstadt: 1973), 92 – 93.

in the later tenth century and is attached to centres along the Rhine upstream from Strasbourg.¹⁷ Occam's razor would therefore suggest that the possibility that Gerald was the author and Erchanbald the original dedicatee should not be dismissed so easily.

But setting aside the question of authorship, what we can say with near certainty is that Erchanbald was the earliest reader of the poem whose name we know, and that he received it at or near the beginning of his pontificate.¹⁸ Why did Gerald think the poem would amuse his bishop? How might Erchanbald have related to its narrative? Whether or not it was written for him, we are entitled to ask what he might have got from it. And even if he did not compose the text, Gerald's rewriting of it was an act of authorship which we are entitled to interpret in some way as a reflection of his own time. In addressing these overlooked questions, I will focus in particular on the poem's striking depiction of King Gunther as a villain: as the personification of greed, as a man who was out of his mind, and indeed as the antithesis of good kingship.¹⁹ Why might a bishop of Strasbourg have been entertained by a tale of greed, revenge, and bad kingship, delivered to him at a moment when his own king, Otto I (936-73), had just reached the zenith of his power with an imperial coronation at Rome? The answer, I think, lies in

¹⁷ Berschin, 'Erchanbald', 13 – 16; Turcan-Verkerk, 'La diffusion', 64 – 104 (who speculates that the earliest manuscript, a fragment, might not have contained the preface).

¹⁸ It was definitely in use as a schoolbook in Speyer by 981: Turcan-Verkerk, 'Langue et littérature', 132 – 3.

¹⁹ J. Peeters, 'Guntharius—Die Fehler eines Königs', *Amsterdamer Beiträge zur Älteren Germanistik* 34 (1991), 33 – 48.

consideration of two core themes: the poet's depictions of geography and treasure. I will address these in turn before returning to the question of Bishop Erchanbald and King Otto.

Place and Perspective

The comprehensibility of *Waltharius*'s setting to an audience in mid-tenth century Strasbourg has not been fully explored. Strasbourg was the main city and chief bishopric of Alsace, part of the kingdom of the Ottonians, the Saxon dynasty which ruled the former Carolingian East Frankish kingdom from 919 until 1024. One of the main challenges faced by the Ottonians as they established their power was extensive raiding by Hungarians, nomadic warriors from Pannonia who had been brought into the Frankish world by one of the last Carolingian kings around 891. The ethnography of the Hungarians was a source of fascination for contemporary observers, and they were frequently identified as successors to earlier peoples from the same region: specifically, the Avars and the Huns. This is explicit in the main history of Otto I's reign, *Deeds of the Saxons* by Widukind of Corvey, which was finished at about the same time that Erchanbald became bishop. The Hungarians, according to Widukind, 'are also called Avars', and he adds that 'some believe [the Avars] are the remainder of the Huns'.²⁰ A similar set of associations is implied by the terminology of *Waltharius*, which uses 'Avar' and 'Hun' interchangeably. The threat posed by the Hungarians has generally been used as an argument against a tenth-century date for the poem, since it is hard to square with the poet's relatively

²⁰ Widukind, *Rerum Gestarum Saxoniarum*, 1.17 – 18, 27 – 28; trans. Bachrach and Bachrach, *Deeds*, 28 – 29.

benign (even comical) depiction of Attila.²¹ But this objection dissolves if the text were written—or at least read—after 955, when Otto I definitively crushed the Hungarians and killed their leaders at the Battle of the Lech.²² There may even be a knowing reference to this longer history in the poem itself, which refers to the Huns enjoying more than a thousand years of rule, and in which Walter speaks of the '*for now [nunc] unconquered people of the Pannonians*'.²³ There were other resonances that a contemporary audience might have noticed. In 935 the Hungarians, like the Huns in the poem, had attacked Burgundy. In 926 they had passed through Alsace, and as recently as 954 they had even been seen on the edges of the Vosges, about fifty miles northwest of Strasbourg, as confederates of Otto I's rebellious son-in-law Conrad the Red.²⁴

If the Huns must have called to the bishop's mind the Hungarians, the poet's description of their Frankish opponents also echoed contemporary conditions. The Ottonians were from Saxony, but the empire they controlled was figuratively Frankish in the eyes of contemporaries.²⁵ Erchanbald was himself addressed as 'bishop of the Franks' in another poem written during his

²¹ Kratz, *Waltharius*, xix on the depiction of Attila.

²² C. Bowlus, *The Battle of the Lechfeld and its Aftermath* (Aldershot: 2006).

²³ *Waltharius*, v. 10, 166 (my italics).

²⁴ Adalbert, *Continuatio*, ed. F. Kurze. In *Reginonis abbatis prumiensis Chronicon, cum continuatione treverensi*, 154 – 79. Hanover: 1890., Flodoard, *Annales*, ed. P. Lauer (Paris: 1906), s.a. 954, 137 – 8.

²⁵ C. Brühl, *Deutschland-Frankreich: Die Geburt zweier Völker* (Cologne: 1995).

lifetime.²⁶ The *Waltharius* poet's characterisation of Gunther as a 'king of the Franks' was thus relevant to contemporary definitions of political geography, and to the bishop of Strasbourg's sense of the political sphere in which he himself operated. It was also specific to the Latin poem: in other versions of the Walter story, Gibicho and Gunther are identified as Burgundian kings (which was, in historical terms, probably correct).²⁷ It is also interesting that the poem places Gunther's 'royal seat' (*sedes regiae*) at Worms.²⁸ Worms was a Roman city and had been an important royal centre under the Carolingians, particularly under Charlemagne before 800. But this was not the case in the first half of the tenth century, when it was barely visited by kings: only two royal appearances (925 and 926) are known from the period 900 – 950. In the 960s, however, Otto I took residence there four times, despite spending all but two years of the decade in Italy. These visits were not routine transits on the royal itinerary, for Worms was in the 960s an important venue for the staging of Ottonian majesty: the ruler's son Otto II was crowned king in the city in 961 and held his first autonomous royal assembly there in 967.²⁹ Our best contemporary source for these assemblies is Adalbert, the continuator of Regino of Prüm's *Chronicle*, who also reports that when the Carolingian king Charles the Simple wanted to take

²⁶ *Clavis Scriptorum Medii Aevi Auctores Galliae 735-987, Tomus I*, ed. M.H. Jullien and F. Perelman (Turnhout: 1994), 361.

²⁷ Dronke, 'Waltharius', 39.

²⁸ *Waltharius*, v. 433.

²⁹ C. Brühl, *Palatium und Civitas. Studien zur Profantopographie spätantiker Civitates vom 3. bis 13. Jahrhundert* (Cologne: 1975), vol. 2, 115 – 7.

control of Alsace in 923, he first came to Worms; and that Otto I had passed through Alsace from Worms ('in Francia') en route to Italy in 966.³⁰ Adalbert's perception of Worms as the chief seat of a Frankish king, and as a springboard for royal campaigns into Alsace, was a perspective from Alsace itself: when he wrote his chronicle in the mid-late 960s Adalbert was abbot of Wissembourg about forty miles north of Strasbourg.

A Frankish king from Worms facing Hunnic antagonists, both threatening to intervene in Alsace: these were features not just of the fictional landscape depicted in *Waltharius*, but also of tenth-century political geography as viewed from the area around Strasbourg at the time Erchanbald became bishop. This coincidence should encourage us to pay more attention to the fact that much of the action in *Waltharius* is set in the Vosges mountains near Strasbourg. Geographical description was a narrative element that writers of this period inherited from the historians of Late Antiquity, but *Waltharius*'s setting is more than simply the backdrop to the poem. The topography of Walter's hideout is described in some detail, its inaccessibility essential to the structure of the narrative as a series of single combats. The Vosges region, characterised as a harsh wilderness, is itself personified in the poem.³¹ The poet introduces the region as 'a massive woodland, having many lairs of beasts, accustomed to echo with the sound of hounds and horns'.³² It was not, though, a benign environment: Walter's hideout was 'a place

³⁰ Adalbert, *Continuatio*, s.a. 923, 965, 966, 157, 175, 177.

³¹ For example, *Waltharius*, v. 823.

³² *Waltharius*, v. 491 – 92.

well suited to bloodthirsty bandits'.³³ Elsewhere, one of Walter's opponents is described in death as 'giving his body to the wild woodland beasts'; and even the heroic Walter himself, after despatching most of his enemies, is said to have 'feared the woodland with its unknown winding paths, which might lead him into impenetrable thorns or even wild beasts'.³⁴

This emphasis on the character of the region as wilderness was not neutral, and drew its force from a deep cultural opposition between untamed and domesticated/civilised space.³⁵ Mastering wilderness, and the beasts it contained, was one of the ideological attributes of powerful kingship in the Frankish world.³⁶ Gunther's failure to control this environment, indeed the fact that he was bested by Walter with its assistance, adds to the poet's unambiguous picture of him as a bad king. It also meshes with Walter's complaints in the poem that the king should have guaranteed him safe passage through his realms, and that as a traveller he should have been protected, rather than assaulted, by royal authority—another important marker of appropriate

³³ *Waltharius*, v. 496.

³⁴ *Waltharius*, v. 913, 1147 – 49.

³⁵ F. Guizard-Duchamp, 'Les espaces du sauvage dans le monde franc: Réalités et représentations', *Actes des congrès de la Société des historiens médiévistes de l'enseignement supérieur public* 37 (2006), 117 – 29.

³⁶ P. Dutton, 'Charlemagne, King of Beasts', in Dutton, *Charlemagne's Mustache and Other Cultural Clusters of a Dark Age* (New York: 2004), 43 – 68.

kingship in this period.³⁷ That this use of the setting was an authorial choice, and not simply descriptive, is indicated by comparison with another famous description of the Vosges, written in the 820s by Ermold the Black in a letter to the Carolingian king Pippin of Aquitaine.³⁸ This is framed as a mocking dialogue between personifications of the Vosges and the Rhine, vying to claim pre-eminence as supporters of royal power. In response to the accusation that it was battered by rain and good only for firewood, the Vosges states that its wood was used to build palaces and churches, and that kings hunted in its forests. In Ermold's eyes, the Vosges was a region that did not rebuff kingship but nourished it. This was hardly surprising in that the Carolingian Emperor Louis the Pious, whom Ermold was ultimately trying to impress, was a regular visitor to the hunting grounds in the Vosges and used such occasions to perform his royal status.³⁹ But where Louis the Pious had hunted regally for animals, the 'mad' and 'arrogant' King Gunther hunted for humans and treasure, stalking Walter and Hildegund through the hills by following their footprints in the dust.⁴⁰ For Ermold, the Vosges was a place where royal power was enhanced; for the *Waltharius* poet, where it failed.

³⁷ *Waltharius*, v. 594 – 95; T. Reuter, 'The Insecurity of Travel in the Early and High Middle Ages: Criminals, Victims and their Medieval and Modern Observers', in Reuter, *Medieval Politics and Modern Mentalities*, ed. J.L. Nelson (Cambridge: 2006), 38 – 71.

³⁸ Ermold, *Ad Pippinum Regem*, in *Poème sur Louis le Pieux et Épîtres au roi Pépin*, ed. E. Faral (Paris: 1932), 202 – 17.

³⁹ E. Goldberg, 'Louis the Pious and the Hunt', *Speculum* 88 (2013), 613 – 43.

⁴⁰ *Waltharius*, v. 512 – 13.

This point is sharpened by the poet in his descriptions of the individual encounters between Walter and the eleven champions (plus Hagen) sent by Gunther to kill him. The poet gives names to all of these men, and brief biographical details to most.⁴¹ Almost all of them come from towns which were central places of royal power in the west of the Ottonian kingdom. The first to be named, Gamalo, is described as a 'prefect of Metz', which brings to mind the position of the Metz-based aristocrat Frederick who had been made 'duke of the Lotharingians' in 959. Two others are from Speyer and, interestingly, Strasbourg. One is said to be a Frank, two are from Worms (the Frankish 'royal seat'), and one is from Saxony (the Ottonian homeland). Walter makes a bleak joke to the Saxon, Ektivrid, before killing him. Ektivrid asks him if he is a 'woodland demon' (*faunus*) and Walter fires back a threat, saying that if he comes any closer 'you will be really able to tell the Saxons that you saw a demon in the Vosges'.⁴² Later, when his men begin to be dismayed at the body count and ask to end the expedition, King Gunther responds: 'If thus shamed I leave the Vosges, then what becomes of me? ... I would rather die than enter Worms after such a thing'.⁴³

This 'here' vs 'there' contrasting of Worms and other royal centres with the peripheral wilderness of the Vosges makes it clear that Gunther and his men are strangers in a strange land, and reminds us that violence can have a geography. Epics and sagas often depict violence (as

⁴¹ *Waltharius*, v. 582 – 1063.

⁴² *Waltharius*, v. 768 – 69.

⁴³ *Waltharius*, v. 946 – 48.

opposed to legitimate force) as characteristic of in-between places and outlying regions.⁴⁴ In Ottonian texts, the western parts of the realm—the so-called ‘middle kingdom’, including Alsace—were often depicted as a wild frontier.⁴⁵ According to Thietmar of Merseburg, ‘the people of the West’ were ‘always fickle’ and displayed a ‘tendency towards arousal’—they were cowards who resisted the rule of God and king and ‘serve[d] only their bodily desires’.⁴⁶ Already in the poem by Ermold (an exile who was anxious to win a recall to the royal court) we find the Alsatians described as ‘an exceedingly ferocious people’, drunk on wealth, barbarous of tongue, and ignorant of proper religion.⁴⁷ The views of Thietmar and Ermold represent the rhetorical disdain of the outsider, the sneering of the metropolitan at the provincial. Erchanbald would not have shared their perspective unquestioningly, for in tenth-century terms he was himself a provincial. If the bishop was able to appreciate the version of this discourse found in *Waltharius*, this implies a slightly different sensibility: a kind of reverse ‘othering’ in which the discourse of wilderness could be appropriated by members of the Alsatian ruling class to fashion their own sense of how they fitted into the Wild West of the Ottonian kingdom.

⁴⁴ Miller, *Bloodtaking*, 188.

⁴⁵ T. Riches, ‘Bishop Gerard I of Cambrai (1012 – 1051) and the Representation of Authority in the *Gesta Episcoporum Cameracensium*’, University of London PhD thesis (2006), 188 – 245.

⁴⁶ Thietmar, *Chronicon*, ed. R. Holtzmann, *Die Chronik des Bischofs Thietmar von Merseburg und ihre Korveier Überarbeitung* (Berlin: 1935), 6.48, 334; trans. D. Warner, *Ottonian Germany* (Manchester: 2001), 270 – 1.

⁴⁷ Ermold, *Ad Pippinum Regem*, 214 – 5.

Treasure and Revenge

Although the poem deals overtly with themes such as heroism, fidelity, and the legitimacy of violence, it is not always fully appreciated that these are secondary to the core motif of the whole poem: the status of the treasure stolen by Walter from Attila, and his attempts to carry it home to Aquitaine through Gunther's kingdom. The poet repeatedly mentions that the treasure was what the king really desired, and he is explicitly described as greedy, arrogant, and 'insane' in terms which echo the personifications of avarice and pride in one of the poet's main sources, Prudentius's fifth-century *Psychomachia*.⁴⁸ At the heart of the poem is a speech by Hagen, seemingly acting here as the poet's interlocutor, on the evils prompted by greed for gold.⁴⁹ The emphasis on this theme in *Waltharius* means it is often read as a parable on greed, and even as a satire on aristocratic acquisitiveness. Students of the poem have even argued that Walter himself is not immune from the text's critique, given his taking of the treasure from the Huns and his anxiety to hold on to it.⁵⁰ But this underrates the realism and subtlety with which Frankish churchmen understood aristocratic society (to which, after all, they belonged)—as long as it was not deemed excessive, they did not necessarily regard the pursuit of wealth as a matter for condemnation.⁵¹ In keeping with the latter observation, I suggest that the wealth issue in

⁴⁸ Kratz, *Mocking Epic*, 33 – 36; Rio, 'Waltharius at Fontenoy', 47 – 52.

⁴⁹ *Waltharius*, v. 857 – 75.

⁵⁰ Kratz, *Mocking Epic*, 47 – 48.

⁵¹ Stone, 'Waltharius and Carolingian Morality', 61 – 65.

Waltharius is not an ecclesiastical suspicion that treasure was corrupting per se, but rather an expression of anxiety about deciding *whose* gold it was.

The starting point here is the observation that the poet treats the treasure as the same body of gold throughout the poem: the gold given by Gibicho to the Huns in tribute is the same gold that Walter steals from Attila, and which Gunther then tries to extort from the hero. Gunther states this explicitly when he realises that the stranger passing through his lands is Walter: 'Rejoice...the tribute treasure [*gaza*] sent by Gibicho to the eastern king is now sent by the Almighty back to me here in my kingdom!'⁵² Gunther then urges his men to pursue Walter and get his 'stolen money' (*furata talenta*), which Walter should be made to 'return' (*reddere*) to him.⁵³ Walter, in response, sarcastically asks the first man sent against him how he expects him to 'return' something to Gunther that was not his in the first place, and wonders aloud how he could be said to have stolen anything from the king.⁵⁴ The wealth is his, and Gunther is in fact the thief.⁵⁵ The dramatic tension in the poem therefore derives not from a generalised suspicion of lay desire for treasure, but from the fact that Gunther and Walter are driven by conflicting narratives of the history of this *particular* treasure. The king claims that the story began with his father's possession of the gold, and that it was therefore a gift which he is now reclaiming. The hero, on the other hand, follows a different script. Ignoring the fact that the wealth had

⁵² *Waltharius*, v. 470 – 72.

⁵³ *Waltharius*, v. 517, 641, 724.

⁵⁴ *Waltharius*, v. 654 – 57.

⁵⁵ *Waltharius*, v. 659, 1218.

previously been given as tribute by the Franks, he implicitly claims that the beginning of its story was his own seizing of the treasure from Attila—which was, by dint of the same argument, a legitimate act.⁵⁶

All of the above examples are given in direct speech: they are represented as the views of the protagonists, not of the poet. The poet's sympathy with Walter's position is nonetheless made very clear in that he refers to Gunther as '*superbus*' (arrogant), '*infelix*' (misguided) and '*demens*' (mad) in precisely these passages. Why, though, does the poet take this point of view? His anxieties appear to relate not to the inherently corrupting influence of wealth, but to the etiquette of its distribution between members of the elite. One aspect of this is the fact that *Waltharius* begins with tribute paid by the Frankish king to the Huns in return for peace. The word used is *censum*—a payment or fee—and the poet emphasises that the decision was legitimised by the consent of all at a council.⁵⁷ One of the champions sent by Gunther against Walter is compared to the Trojan warrior Pandarus, 'who was once ordered to break a treaty'; and another is said to have rendered his soul at death to Orcus, in classical literature not only a personification of death but also a punisher of broken oaths.⁵⁸ Orcus is also said to await Gunther

⁵⁶ On the competing classifications of gifts and similar transactions see Miller, *Bloodtaking*, 77 – 110; W.I. Miller, *Humiliation* (Ithaca: 1993), 15 – 52; W.I. Miller, *Audun and the Polar Bear: Luck, Law, and Largesse in a Medieval Tale of Risky Business* (Leiden and Boston: 2008), 99 – 113.

⁵⁷ *Waltharius*, v. 20 – 24.

⁵⁸ *Waltharius*, v. 728, 913.

when he dies.⁵⁹ The oath broken by Gunther and his men can only be the original Frankish peace deal with Attila: in attempting to regain the Frankish treasure after having broken the treaty with the Huns, the king was trying to have his cake and eat it. The poet's insinuation seems to be that the breaking of the oaths meant that the Franks had in effect relinquished their claim to the gold before Walter had asserted his own.

A second argument embedded in *Waltharius* is that Gunther does not observe proper etiquette in the distribution of booty—in fact he is shown up in this respect by the other main characters. He explicitly states that the treasure is destined to be his, personally.⁶⁰ In a long passage at the heart of the poem, just before the first champion is sent against him, Walter offers some of the gold to Gunther in return for peace, even though he thinks he is entitled to expect safe passage by default. Gunther is intent on taking all the treasure for himself, and despite Hagen's attempts to persuade him otherwise, he refuses the offer.⁶¹ Later, Walter renews the offer, this time explaining to Hagen what should have happened if the king were behaving appropriately. In this alternative scenario, Walter would have been recognised and received with hospitality, and would have surrendered gifts to his hosts voluntarily.⁶² Hagen himself observes the etiquette of warfare by saying that he will not fight his former friend, but in so doing will not

⁵⁹ *Waltharius*, v. 1327.

⁶⁰ *Waltharius*, v. 471 – 72, 641.

⁶¹ *Waltharius*, v. 566 – 665.

⁶² *Waltharius*, v. 1239 – 63.

claim his share of any spoils.⁶³ In seeking all the treasure for himself, Gunther manifests not only greed, but also a refusal to observe the rules for royal comportment in dealing with the distribution of such wealth. Those rules, or expectations, are articulated in the poem by Hagen and Walter, whose magnanimous attempts to show good faith by giving up their claims to gold mark them as more kingly than the king. Gunther's actions are depicted as tasteless and excessive, and disproportionate to his position and to the situation.⁶⁴ The violence that unfurls in consequence of Gunther's refusal is therefore on his hands. Walter's killing of the first champion is portrayed as legitimate because he first offered gold to avoid the fight. Some of the other warriors then claim that they are fighting Walter not for gold, but in vengeance for his killing of their colleagues.⁶⁵ Not least among them is Hagen, who is distraught at the death of his nephew Batavrid, the sixth champion. Hagen laments that Batavrid died as a result of (Gunther's) greed, and explains to Walter that he cannot walk away because his need to avenge the young man overrides their friendship.⁶⁶ The king responds by trying to manipulate his faltering men into fighting Walter for revenge rather than treasure.⁶⁷ When it comes to the crunch, though, he

⁶³ *Waltharius*, v. 637.

⁶⁴ I borrow the language here from W.I. Miller, *Eye for an Eye* (Cambridge: 2006), 18 – 25; Miller, *Audun*, 117 – 8.

⁶⁵ *Waltharius*, v. 699 – 701, 914.

⁶⁶ *Waltharius*, v. 846-85, 1266 – 79.

⁶⁷ *Waltharius*, v. 950 – 53.

himself will not avenge his own men.⁶⁸ For him, it's all about the money. The actions of Gunther's men, motivated by loyalty to the king and the desire for vengeance after their fellows had been killed, are described (even validated) by the poet as comprehensible in themselves. The actions of the king himself are not. Everything that happens follows from Gunther's belief—mistaken, in the poet's opinion—that the treasure was his and not Walter's. This is the original sin of *Waltharius*, from which stems the ensuing cycle of revenge, death, and mutilation.⁶⁹

The distribution of treasure in the form of tribute and booty was a sensitive, rule-bound issue in many medieval societies, and one whose categories and vocabulary were open to misunderstanding and dispute.⁷⁰ It needed to be handled with great care. This is why, when Hrut takes booty from a pirate in *Njal's Saga*, he is careful to agree to the terms of its redistribution with the Norwegian king before taking a cut for himself.⁷¹ A cluster of analogous codes and expectations surrounded the distribution of plunder among the elites of the Carolingian Empire (though its systems for gathering and paying tribute to outside aggressors were extremely controversial).⁷² Indeed, the poem's extended rumination on Hunnic treasure is sometimes linked by modern commentators to Charlemagne's crushing of the Avars in 796: contemporaries

⁶⁸ *Waltharius*, v. 1060 – 65.

⁶⁹ Cf. Miller, *Humiliation*, 59 – 60.

⁷⁰ Miller, *Audun*, 81 – 82, 124.

⁷¹ *Njal's Saga*, trans. M. Magnusson and H. Palsson (Harmondsworth: 1960), c. 5, 47 – 48.

⁷² T. Reuter, 'Plunder and Tribute in the Carolingian Empire', in Reuter, *Medieval Politics*, 231 – 50.

commented on the vast amount of wealth this yielded for the king, who then distributed it to his important followers and lesser kings around Europe.⁷³ But the story in *Waltharius* is about a king paying tribute to the Huns in return for peace, and the subsequent revocation of that treaty. This resembles the events of the 790s much less than those of the 920s, when the first Ottonian king Henry I bought peace from the Hungarians and then, nearly a decade later, broke it. A tenth-century source even tells us that Henry did this deal because his soldiers were not up to the job, which is the same reason the poem gives us for Gibicho's equivalent decision.⁷⁴ Henry's deal should be seen as part of a broader post-Carolingian landscape whose politics in the first half of the tenth century were dominated by the negotiation of treaties and alliances, not just with invaders, but also between kings and their aristocratic elites.⁷⁵ The battle in the Vosges, and Gunther's refusal to deal with Walter, reads like the result of just such an agreement going wrong. To an audience in the middle of the tenth century, this failure of dialogue could readily have been interpreted as a comment on the fragility of contemporary political dynamics, transposed into a mythical historical register.

As part of their depiction of a world glued together by deals and agreements, narrative sources make it clear that the etiquette of plunder, tribute, and treaty-making was a subject of anxiety and discussion in Ottonian political culture. Widukind of Corvey makes numerous

⁷³ Einhard, *Vita Karoli Magni*, ed. O. Holder-Egger (Leipzig and Hanover: 1911), c. 13, 15 – 16.

⁷⁴ Widukind, *Rerum Gestarum Saxoniarum*, 1.38, 55 – 57.

⁷⁵ G. Althoff, *Amicitiae und Pacta: Bündnis, Einung, Politik und Gebetsgedenken im beginnenden 10. Jahrhundert* (Hanover: 1992).

references to the distribution of spoils and booty among one's followers as a vital component of good lordship.⁷⁶ In a passage about margrave Gero, leader of the Saxon forces on the eastern frontier, he describes the declining loyalty of soldiers who were inadequately compensated with an appropriate share of booty.⁷⁷ In Widukind's telling, even the very origins of the Saxons were tied up in a story about the distribution of treasure. The story revolves around an exchange of gifts sealing a treaty between the Saxons and the Thuringians. Coming to the lands of the latter, a Saxon youth trades gold arm-rings (the same type of treasure carried by Walter in the poem) for dust, which he scatters on the ground, allowing the Saxons to claim that this land is now theirs – inevitably provoking a battle with the Thuringians, who take a rather different view of the transaction.⁷⁸ This is obviously a legend, but it shows that contemporaries were very well aware that an exchange of gifts in the making of an agreement could be open to opposing interpretations. The legalistic one used by the Saxons in their use of the dust, and approved of by Widukind, was pretty implausible – but not much more far-fetched than the *Waltharius* poet's interpretation of Gunther's obligation to relinquish his claim to the Frankish treasure because of the expiry of his father's deal with the Huns.

Widukind's discussion of the peace deal done between Henry I and the Hungarians in 924 is also suspiciously defensive. Seeking to narrate it as a staging point on the road to Otto I's

⁷⁶ Widukind, *Rerum Gestarum Saxonicarum*, 1.35, 1.36, 2.11, 2.15, 2.17, 3.66, 3.68, 48 – 54, 74 – 78, 79 – 83, 141 – 3; Thietmar, *Chronicon*, 8.32, 530 – 1.

⁷⁷ Widukind, *Rerum Gestarum Saxonicarum*, 2.30, 91 – 92.

⁷⁸ Widukind, *Rerum Gestarum Saxonicarum*, 1.4-6, 5 – 7.

routing of the same enemy in 955, the historian claims that Henry extorted peace from the enemy and in return only gave up a prisoner and 'some gifts'.⁷⁹ But elsewhere in his text he makes clear that gifts given in such a situation constituted an acknowledgement of tributary status, and indeed lets slip that Henry I thought so too—as shown by his apology to his people for 'plundering' their churches and families to pay the Hungarians their 'customary gifts'.⁸⁰ Given that Widukind had not balked at describing two major rebellions faced by his own king Otto I, it may seem surprising that he felt the need to neutralise Henry's tribute to the Hungarians by recategorising it as mere giving of 'gifts'. The reason for Widukind's caution is indicated by the *Waltharius* poet's characterisation of Gibicho's tribute to the Huns as an act of cowardice: it was very easy for such transactions to become, in the eyes of hostile observers, evidence of weakness, corruption, or avarice.

Henry I's dealings with the Hungarians obviously still mattered to the narratives of Ottonian history told in Erchanbald's time, but to the ruling elites of Alsace the events of the 950s would have been much fresher in the memory. The Hungarian army which appeared on the fringes of the Vosges in 954 was in the employ of two rebellious dukes: Liudolf of Swabia (the king's son) and Conrad the Red of Lotharingia (the king's son-in-law).⁸¹ Lotharingia to the north and Swabia to the east were the two duchies with the closest links to Alsace, and the powerful of

⁷⁹ Widukind, *Rerum Gestarum Saxonicarum*, 1.32, 45.

⁸⁰ Widukind, *Rerum Gestarum Saxonicarum*, 1.10, 1.35, 1.38 – 39, 17 – 18, 48 – 51, 55 – 59.

⁸¹ Ruotger, *Vita Brunonis*, ed. I. Ott, *Ruotgers Lebensbeschreibung des Erzbischofs Bruno von Köln* (Weimar: 1951), c. 19, 17 – 19.

the region intermittently traded their loyalties between them.⁸² Just before Easter 954 the Hungarians had been 'received publicly', at Worms no less, and given 'abundant gifts of gold and silver' by the rebels.⁸³ Later in the year, after the rebellion had been subdued, Otto lamented not only that Liudolf had worked alongside 'the enemies of God', but also that the Hungarians were returning home 'loaded down with my gold and silver with which I enriched my son and son-in-law'.⁸⁴ Liudolf threw himself on his father's mercy, claiming he had acted under pressure: he had only 'gathered' money for the Hungarians out of fear.⁸⁵ Here is another situation that echoes the dynamics found in *Waltharius*: a tribute paid to 'Avars' and a king claiming that the money was his – even though it had been 'gathered' from the coffers of the kingdom's churches and paid over without the ruler's knowledge.

With his triumph over the Hungarians at the Lech a few months later, Otto had the opportunity to actualise his claim to this treasure. One source says that the king had promised to

⁸² T. Zotz, 'Das Elsaß – ein Teil des Zwischenreichs?', in *Lotharingia: Eine europäische Kernlandschaft um das Jahr 1000*, ed. H. Herrmann and R. Schneider (Saarbrücken: 1995), 49 – 70.

⁸³ Widukind, *Rerum Gestarum Saxoniarum*, 3.30, 11 – 18; trans. Bachrach and Bachrach, *Deeds*, 116; Adalbert, *Continuatio*, s.a. 954, 168; Flodoard, *Annales*, s.a. 954, 137 – 38.

⁸⁴ Widukind, *Rerum Gestarum Saxoniarum*, 3.32, 118 – 9; trans. Bachrach and Bachrach, *Deeds*, 117.

⁸⁵ Widukind, *Rerum Gestarum Saxoniarum*, 3.32, 118 – 9; trans. Bachrach and Bachrach, *Deeds*, 118.

reward all those who joined him in the battle; another, that in the aftermath of the battle 'trophies' were sent round the realm to advertise the king's great victory.⁸⁶ But it is not at all likely that the money 'gathered' by Liudolf in the previous year found its way back to its previous owners. Widukind usually refers to a distribution of booty in the wake of Ottonian victories, but the Lech is an exception.⁸⁷ In fact, the king's triumph was principally celebrated in Saxony, and it was the distant Saxon church of Magdeburg which received much of the wealth that Otto had acquired.⁸⁸ This was despite the fact that very few Saxons fought at the Lech, where the army was primarily made up of fighters from the west and south of the kingdom: Lotharingia, Swabia, Alsace, Franconia, and Bavaria – the same areas which had been at the heart of the rebellion of 953-4 and whose churches and landowners had been prevailed upon (willingly or not) to pay for Liudolf's and Conrad's Hungarian mercenaries.⁸⁹ These regions were thus forgiven for their uprising, and reintegrated into the expanding Ottonian kingdom. But they were almost certainly not compensated for the treasure they had lost – which ended up, via the Hungarians, in the hands of the triumphant king.

⁸⁶ Thietmar, *Chronicon*, 2.9, 49; Ruotger, *Vita Brunonis*, c. 35, 36.

⁸⁷ E.g. Widukind, *Rerum Gestarum Saxoniarum*, 2.17, 81 – 83 on the Battle of Birten during the great rebellion of the late 930s.

⁸⁸ Thietmar, *Chronicon*, 2.11, 50.

⁸⁹ Widukind, *Rerum Gestarum Saxoniarum*, 3.44, 123 – 5.

Erchanbald and Otto

The above analysis of two prominent but under-appreciated themes in *Waltharius* shows that the poem would have had strong resonances for a mid-tenth-century Alsatian audience. Its depiction of the Vosges as a place where kingship was tested and failed, and its expressions of anxiety around the etiquette of plunder and tribute, were not only relevant but integral to the political discourse of the 960s. But the poet hitched these two themes to a pretty savage critique of a king. Why would Gerald have thought his bishop would be receptive to such a commentary? This seems a hard circle to square because, as has been long noted, Erchanbald was a conspicuous supporter of Ottonian authority during his long tenure, receiving in return a number of generous privileges connected to jurisdiction and coinage which made him in theory at least one of the most powerful bishops in the whole kingdom.⁹⁰ In a document of 981 describing the military forces to be sent to the king from each of the realm's major churches, Strasbourg was the first named bishopric.⁹¹ It is noticeable, however, that almost all the evidence for the close relationship between the bishop of Strasbourg and the king comes from after 973: in other words, from the reign of Otto II, not that of Otto I. Although the relationship between Otto I and Erchanbald before 973 is not clear from the sources, we should not simply assume that it was unambiguously positive.

⁹⁰ *Die Urkunden Otto des II.*, ed. T. Sickel (Hanover: 1888), nos. 72, 73, 129, 267. Commentary: H. Büttner, *Geschichte des Elsaß I*, ed. T. Endemann (Sigmaringen: 1991), 176 – 7; Berschin, 'Erkanbald', 3 – 4.

⁹¹ *Indiculus Loricatorum*, ed. L. Weiland, MGH Constitutiones 1 (Hanover: 1893), no. 436.

This is especially so because the king's attempts to govern Alsace in the second half of his reign were anything but smooth. In the first half of the tenth century, kings had occasionally fought for control of Alsace: there was a violent three-way competition for the Upper Rhine region—including the sacking and burning of Strasbourg—between the rulers of Burgundy, East Francia, and West Francia in the early 910s, and a similar conflict at the end of the 930s during the first major rebellion against Otto I. On the latter occasion the region nearly became the graveyard of Ottonian rule when, during a siege of Breisach in Alsace 'many of the king's supporters abandoned him because they no longer had hope that the Saxons would continue to rule'.⁹² One of the most high-profile deserters was Bishop Rothard of Strasbourg, Erchanbald's predecessor-but-one.⁹³ Such flare-ups of hot conflict aside, the more regular exercise of kingship and royal authority was virtually absent from the region for several decades after the end of the Carolingian Empire. This doesn't mean that Alsace was lawless, but it was more or less free from direct royal intervention for the best part of half a century.⁹⁴ All this changed markedly in the early 950s, when Otto I began to pay close attention to the southern parts of his kingdom, driven by his increasing interest in Italy, which he conquered by means of three invasions in 951 – 52, 961 – 65, and 966 – 72.

⁹² Widukind, *Rerum Gestarum Saxonicarum*, 2.24, 87; trans. Bachrach and Bachrach, *Deeds*, 84.

⁹³ Widukind, *Rerum Gestarum Saxonicarum*, 2.25, 87 – 88.

⁹⁴ M. Borgolte, 'Geschichte der Grafengewalt im Elsaß von Dagobert I. bis Otto dem Großen', *Zeitschrift für die Geschichte des Oberrheins* 131 (1983), 3 – 54 at 46 – 49.

Otto's approach to controlling Alsace in the 950s and 960s was highly intrusive in comparison to the laissez-faire approach which had prevailed hitherto, involving the sudden dispossession of local bigwigs and the attempted dismantling of their families' positions. The dominant aristocratic family in the region is known as the Etichonids, and by some accounts their position went back to the seventh century.⁹⁵ Even taking a less optimistic view of the continuity of family consciousness, a branch of the Etichonids characterised by the names Guntram, Eberhard, and Hugh had been the leading noble kin group in Alsace for well over a century by the time Otto I took a hostile interest in their affairs in the 950s. The first manifestation of this interest was the king's deposition of a count called Guntram at a large assembly in 952. This was the assembly at which Otto attempted (not altogether successfully) to cement his recent invasion of Italy, and it was attended by bishops and aristocrats from south of the Alps as well as East Francia.⁹⁶ The charge was treason or infidelity, though we don't have the details because the trial is only known to us through passing references in a number of charters via which the count's confiscated lands were subsequently redistributed.⁹⁷ The accusation may have been deeply

⁹⁵ F. Vollmer, 'Die Etichonen: Ein Beitrag zur Frage der Kontinuität früher Adelsfamilien', in *Studien und Vorarbeiten zur Geschichte des grossfränkischen und frühdeutschen Adels*, ed. G. Tellenbach (Freiburg: 1957), 137 – 84.

⁹⁶ Adalbert, *Continuatio*, s.a. 952, 166.

⁹⁷ *Die Urkunden Konrad I., Heinrich I. und Otto I.*, ed. T. Sickel (Hanover: 1879 – 84), nos. 155, 166, 189, 201, 236; *Die Urkunden Heinrichs II. und Arduins*, ed. H. Bresslau et al. (Hanover: 1900 – 3), no. 77.

cynical if, as has been persuasively argued, the charges were revenge-served-cold from Guntram's participation in the mass rebellion against Otto more than a decade earlier, in 938 – 9.⁹⁸ A second manoeuvre against the same family was prosecuted in 959, with the king putting the monastery at Lure, controlled by Guntram's brothers, under direct royal control in the guise of monastic reform.⁹⁹

However sincerely he believed in his rhetoric of treason and reform, Otto's moves against Guntram and his brothers were highly opportunistic, because the lands at stake were strategically important. Guntram's estates were essential for controlling key routes through the Upper Rhine region, especially access to the Bündner Pass across the Alps, while Lure controlled access to the Burgundian Gate, a pass connecting Alsace and Burgundy to the west via the Vosges.¹⁰⁰ The main beneficiaries of these dispossessions, moreover, were the family of Otto's second wife Adelheid, whom he had married in Italy in 951. Adelheid was a figure with important connections in all the regions surrounding Alsace: descended on her mother's side from the dukes of Swabia, she was daughter and sister of kings of Burgundy and widow of a king of Italy. In the 950s and 960s Otto placed key Alsatian lands in the hands of her brother Conrad III of

⁹⁸ T. Zotz, 'König Otto I., Graf Guntram und Breisach', *Zeitschrift für die Geschichte des Oberrheins* 137 (1989), 66 – 77.

⁹⁹ *Die Urkunden Ottos I.*, no. 199; Büttner, *Geschichte des Elsaß*, 164; H. Hummer, *Politics and Power in Early Medieval Europe: Alsace and the Frankish World 600 – 1000* (Cambridge: 2006), 229 – 31, 240 – 46.

¹⁰⁰ Borgolte, 'Geschichte der Grafengewalt', 50; Büttner, *Geschichte des Elsaß*, 165 – 6.

Burgundy, her mother Bertha, and Adelheid herself. Her other brother Rudolf was 'duke' of the Alsations by 962.¹⁰¹ The purpose of Otto's strategy was not only to link together the power-bases of his new in-laws in the south-west of his kingdom, but also to transform Alsace from a frontier zone into a centre of royal activity on the Upper Rhine, binding it more closely with its neighbours and facilitating access to Italy. The marginalisation of Liudolf of Swabia and Conrad the Red which led to the rebellion of 953 – 4 was a direct consequence of Otto's marriage to Adelheid and the promotion of her family. In fact, the trigger for the rising was the granting of the palace-monastery of Erstein, in Alsace, to Bertha.¹⁰² This was much more than a bit of regional housekeeping: members of the old guard in the south and west certainly understood which way the wind was blowing.

What Erchanbald of Strasbourg thought about any of this in the years after his accession can be no more than a matter of speculation. He must, though, have been aware of the controversy surrounding Otto's intervention in Alsace. He had been a member of his own predecessor's entourage during the earlier 960s, when the king was still issuing charters reminding people of Guntram's infidelity. In fact, the redistribution of strategic Alsatian lands and monasteries to members of Otto's family and other Saxon allies continued into the second half of the 960s.¹⁰³ After the loss of Lure, Guntram's brothers refocused their family network on

¹⁰¹ Büttner, *Geschichte des Elsaß*, 164 – 72; T. Zotz, 'Die Ottonen und das Elsaß', in *Kaiserin Adelheid*, ed. F. Staab and T. Unger (Speyer: 2005), 51 – 68 at 53 – 60.

¹⁰² Adalbert, *Continuatio*, s.a. 953, 166.

¹⁰³ E.g. *Die Urkunden Ottos I.*, nos. 284, 365, 368 – 69.

new residences high in the Vosges and also established a new monastery at Altdorf near Strasbourg, with a large endowment including property in the city itself. The new house was consecrated by Erchanbald in 974.¹⁰⁴ The royal intervention at Lure had itself been a blow to the Strasbourg bishops, who (according to a tenth-century source) had had ambitions of their own at the house, and who were now expressly excluded by the terms of Otto's reform.¹⁰⁵

The idea that a bishop might have entertained a negative attitude to the southern expansion of royal authority is not so far-fetched (especially since we don't know that Erchanbald—unlike his predecessor Udo—was a royal appointment). A text written at a royal nunnery in the Ottonians' Saxon heartland in the early 970s was openly critical of Otto I's Italian adventures.¹⁰⁶ In 972 Archbishop Adalbert of Magdeburg—the same Adalbert who had written the unambiguously pro-Otto chronicle at Wissembourg in the mid-960s—made the same point by publicly treating a Saxon duke in the manner of a king while Otto was south of the Alps.¹⁰⁷ Prior to its foundation in 968, Otto's long-gestated plan to establish an archbishopric at his favourite church of Magdeburg was itself a matter of great controversy among the East Frankish

¹⁰⁴ Büttner, *Geschichte des Elsaß*, 173 – 4; Hummer, *Politics and Power*, 247 – 9.

¹⁰⁵ Hummer, *Politics and Power*, 238.

¹⁰⁶ *Vita Mathildis Reginae Antiquior*, ed. B. Schütte, in *Die Lebensbeschreibungen der Königin Mathilde*, MGH SRG 66 (Hanover: 1994), 109 – 42 at c. 15, 139 – 40.

¹⁰⁷ Thietmar, *Chronicon*, 2.28, 73 – 74; G. Althoff, 'Das Bett des Königs in Magdeburg: Zu Thietmar II, 28', in *Festschrift für Berent Schwineköper zu seinem 70. Geburtstag*, ed. H. Maurer and H. Patze (Sigmaringen: 1982), 141 – 53.

bishops, with the main opponent being Otto's own son, Archbishop William of Mainz.¹⁰⁸

Strasbourg was a subordinate diocese of Mainz. When in 966 Otto marched from Worms en route to Italy through Alsace (his last visit to the region, and the first time we can be sure he met Erchanbald) he paused at Strasbourg only long enough to reallocate more confiscated lands to support his hoped-for archbishopric in Magdeburg.¹⁰⁹ This was a supremely confident king in action, not only brushing aside opposition and dismantling the power of those who got in his way, but rubbing it in their faces and shouting it from the rooftops.

We can't know what the bishop of Strasbourg thought about these matters, but we do know that he read *Waltharius*. Did its stories of Hunnic invaders, Burgundian queens, and Frankish kings remind him of his own day? Would Gunther's fixation on 'his' treasure have made him think wryly of Otto I's appropriation of the gold given by the western churches to the Hungarians, via Liudolf of Swabia and Conrad the Red? Might he have relished the poem's haughty king coming a cropper in the Vosges when considering Otto's rapid dismantling of time-immemorial political arrangements among the ruling class of Alsace? And when he considered Walter's heroic stand in the forests and gorges west of Strasbourg did the bishop think about what had happened at Lure, itself situated in a gap in the mountains, or of Guntram's brothers building their new hilltop residences high in the Vosges? *Waltharius* is not a *roman à clef*. It does not map neatly onto the contours of contemporary politics. But, knowing what he knew

¹⁰⁸ M. Becher, *Rex, Dux und Gens: Untersuchungen zur Entstehung des sächsischen Herzogtums im 9. und 10. Jahrhundert* (Husum: 1996), 289 – 90, 296.

¹⁰⁹ *Die Urkunden Ottos I.*, nos. 331 – 33.

about Otto and the Vosges, how could the bishop not be reminded of his own times? This, surely, is one reason why Gerald thought the poem would amuse Erchanbald ('it is for playing rather than praying') and hoped that it would make his long days pass more quickly.¹¹⁰

Conclusion

The recent consensus that *Waltharius* is best contextualised in the Carolingian period undersells the poem's compatibility with the Ottonian world in which we know it found an audience. The arguments made in this article reinforce Berschin's case for Gerald as the author of the text and Erchanbald as its original recipient. The fact that the earliest manuscripts were made in the later tenth century at centres along the Rhine valley was an important part of Berschin's case. To this we might now add that the monastery which produced what seems to be the earliest copy of all was directly connected to the events we have been describing: Lorsch was one of the institutions which benefited from the dismantling of Guntram's estate, receiving rights in his major estate of Brumath.¹¹¹ Control of Brumath, in fact, may have been the issue at the heart of Guntram's alleged treachery.¹¹² But even if we don't insist on a mid-tenth century origin for the text, we can still gain some insights into that period by thinking about how Erchanbald might have read the poem. We need not doubt that he would have appreciated the arguments of numerous modern scholars that he had in front of him a Christianised version of epic poetry which took much of its moral meaning from a sophisticated dialogue with classical and patristic sources. The poem's

¹¹⁰ *Waltharius*, v. 18-20.

¹¹¹ *Die Urkunden Ottos I.*, no. 201; Büttner, *Geschichte des Elsaß*, 166.

¹¹² Zotz, 'Guntram', 70 – 71, 75 – 76.

puzzling ending, with the main protagonists maimed and joking with each other about their injuries should be read in this light: Hagen's loss of an eye and some of his teeth, adumbrated earlier in the poem, can be read as a Christian parable on the futility of revenge—literally, an eye for an eye.¹¹³ 'Thus was the treasure of the Avars shared!' adds the poet, archly.¹¹⁴

But the contemporary resonances of the poem mean that it can't have been interpreted only as an intellectual exercise predicated entirely on a deep appreciation of its profound intertextuality, nor as a single-minded clerical condemnation of lay greed. It was also an ironic commentary on the complex world in which the protagonists lived, and in which the poet and his readers could recognise their own. The poet was not only a neo-Prudentius, but also a proto-Miller. The drama and tension in the narrative resides not in simple moral lessons but in the poet's wry acknowledgement of the competing demands that operated on Walter and Hagen. Their loyalty to each other was ultimately incompatible with Hagen's loyalty to Gunther and Walter's to Attila. Their friendship was compromised by Walter's killing of Hagen's nephew, which in turn was perfectly justified as a response to Gunther's arrogance and greed. Revenge, killing and the desire for wealth were not satirised per se—the poet's much more subtle point was that such things could in themselves be justified, but that the irreconcilable perspectives of the protagonists turned them into chapters of a tragi-comic story in which nobody could truly win. This is all made explicit in Hagen's agonised exchanges with Gunther and Walter in which

¹¹³ Kratz, *Waltharius*, xxii. On body-parts as value-bearing see Miller, *Eye for an Eye*, 46 – 48; and Eva Miller's article in the present volume.

¹¹⁴ *Waltharius*, v. 1404.

he laments his impossibly compromised position.¹¹⁵ Hagen, caught between the other two characters, understood precisely the etiquettes of loyalty by which he was inexorably crushed. Walter was driven by the knowledge that he was in the right. Gunther, on the other hand, was driven by an inflexible belief in the authority of the king's will which led him to reject all attempts at compromise. Individually, each might have had a case, but in combination their motivations led only to conflict. In such circumstances, the regular rhythms of a politics based on deals and truces could not work. The fragile cultural balance on which perched the smooth operation of politics was placed in jeopardy when presided over by a king who could not be trusted to follow the rules—or to adhere to the spirit as well as the letter of the deals which he himself had made.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁵ *Waltharius*, v. 1067 – 1125, 1239 – 79.

¹¹⁶ For comments on a draft of this article I am grateful to Rob Bartlett, Eric Goldberg and Matthias Tischler; and to Chris Callow for discussing the sagas with me. This article forms part of the HERA JRP III project 'After Empire: Using and Not Using the Past in the Crisis of the Carolingian Empire'.

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