Constructing Mythologies of the Germanen in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-century Germany

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Casting its gaze broadly across the 19th and first half of the 20th centuries, this essay investigates the construction of a pre-history of German visual art and architecture rooted in the ancient practice of the Germanen. After the Congress of Vienna created the framework in 1815 for the modern European nation states, art and architecture assumed a new role in defining and giving form to the national character, with museums and public institutions designed to serve the public domain. Accordingly, art history was structured according to national schools, which were seen to exemplify national character. In Germany this process of mythologisation through the reinvention of ancient art practice was nurtured as a powerful emotional antidote to the modernisation, internationalisation, and secularisation of German society. As Claude Lévi-Strauss once noted, myths are ‘machines for the suppression of time’.\(^1\) It was also a highly promiscuous activity, ranging in its search for possible sources across all the visual and decorative arts, architecture, archaeology, ethnology, linguistics, literary history, and material culture. This short essay explores the diversity of this compulsion to invent and construct mythologies of nation, memory, and tradition, and its recurring iterations over the 19th and 20th centuries.

Definitions and adoptions

The Germanen are defined not by geographical location but by language and ethnology, with tribal groupings coalescing around three main groupings: the North Germanic, essentially the modern Scandinavian nations; the East Germanic based around the Oder and the Vistula; and the West Germanic group, made up of Elbe Germanen (Lombards, Bavarians and Alemanni), North Sea Germanen (Angles, Frisians, Saxons), and

Weser-Rhein *Germanen* (Saxons and Franks). Add to this already complicated picture the impact of large-scale ethnic migration and the definition of what exactly *Germanen* culture represents becomes a contentious question. Indeed, as Sybille Ehringhaus has noted: ‘The word *Germanen* solely reflects the perception of whoever is using it. (...) In the age of humanism, in late 19th-century Romanticism, and in the period of National Socialism, the *Germanen* were invoked to construct national roots and thus to reinforce a sense of nationhood.’\(^2\) Mythologisation does not necessarily imply falsification and misrepresentation, however, and the construction of narratives of community is patently a work of imagination and creativity, which envisions or gives tangible form to a sentiment that is real and known to exist, but cannot be seen. In this sense, the term *Germanen* carried social-utopian resonances for Montesquieu in his *Esprit des Lois* of 1748. But it is also a term whose lack of definition makes it vulnerable to exploitation and abuse: for 19th-century race theorists like Joseph Arthur de Gobineau and Houston Stewart Chamberlain it served as justification for bigotry, and intolerance.\(^3\) The insistence on the primacy of the primeval and the primordial over the shifting and often alien conventions of the contemporary moment brings with it an exaggerated sense of authenticity and thus purity, which can be exploited as a basis for social engineering. Nationhood, by definition, can be both inclusive and exclusive.

From the days of *Sturm und Drang* in the 1770s, an engagement with the northern fringes of Europe had been used as a means of redefining a German national culture. Johann Gottfried Herder, for example, had written about Ossian in *Von deutscher Art und Kunst*, published in 1773. The occupation of large parts of Germany by Napoleonic France between 1806 and 1813 also prompted serious questioning into what it meant to be German. Jacob Grimm led the way with a series of volumes that included *Über den altdeutschen Meistergesang* (Göttingen, 1811); *Altdeutsche Wälder* (Kassel, Frankfurt, 1813–16, 3 vols.); and *Die Lieder der alten Edda* (Berlin, 1815, with Wilhelm Grimm). The revelation of northern alternatives to the romance cultures of Italy and France gathered pace over the 19th century, with Nordic and Germanic themes favoured. The very name of the Walhalla, built near Regensburg in the early 1840s and dedicated to eminent contemporary and historical figures of the German


tongue’ ties it explicitly to the Norse sagas, while the debt to Germanic precedent is featured in the northern pediment frieze depicting the Battle of Teutoburg Forest in 9CE, when Hermann, chieftain of the Germanen Cherusci tribe, was victorious over three Roman legions. The widely held view at the time, that the Germanen tribes and the ancient Greeks had shared ethnic routes in Central Asia, made it entirely possible to frame a Germanic hero in a classical pediment.4

The core text in demarcating the Germanen came not from inside the linguistic grouping but from the Roman historian Tacitus, who wrote his account of Germania around 98CE, describing the inhabitants as follows: ‘(...) in the peoples of Germany there has been given to the world a race unmixed by intermarriage with other races, a peculiar people and pure, like no-one but themselves, whence it comes that their physique, so far as can be said with their vast numbers, is identical: fierce blue eyes, red hair, tall frames, powerful.’5 The rediscovery of this text in the 15th century aroused great interest among German humanists and prompted the identification of Germania with Germany. As Heinrich Beck has noted: ‘Renaissance humanism led to a conscious nationalism in which the Germani rose to become a unique source of popular Germanic thought and culminated in the formula: Germanic equals German. The continued existence of this equation in subsequent centuries, down to the present (…).’6 Predictably, the interest in the culture and art of the Germanen during the 19th and 20th centuries was stimulated by domestic upheaval and uncertainty.

**Mythologising**

In his dedication to Georg Gottfried Gervinus in the first volume of his history of the German language, published in the revolutionary year of 1848, Jacob Grimm made an appeal for national unity based on shared language and the cultural heritage derived from specifically Scandinavian sources such as the Norse sagas, the Eddic songs and the Skaldic poems.7 The appeal of such a coherent world view can be sensed in the introduction to a book on nature cults in Germanen antiquity, published in Berlin in 1877 by Wilhelm Mannhardt, a scholar of mythology. Looking back to his youthful discovery of Grimm’s Deutsche Mythologie, Mannhardt recalls: ‘It was the summer holiday; the August apple tree in the

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4 See also Rudolf Petersdorff, Germanen und Griechen: Übereinstimmung in ihrer ältesten Kultur im Anschluss an die Germania des Tacitus und Homer (Wiesbaden: C.G. Kunzes Nachfolger, 1902).
middle of our garden threw its rosy-cheeked fruit into my lap. At that point a Secundaner [in the penultimate year of secondary school], I read this masterpiece, which had been achieved with enormous effort, from beginning to end – and the direction my life would take was decided. The conditions under which I grew up, revealed to me at an early age, and in contrast to my rigid Prussian surroundings, a distinctly national way of thinking and a lively interest in the various form of religious life." Born in 1831, Mannhardt would have been a Secundaner in 1847 or 1848. His memoir moves on to fulsome praise of Grimm’s genius: "Only rarely has a book generated such a magnificent outcome as this one. It became a national accomplishment, bringing together and making use of customs, legends, myths, superstitions, songs – in short oral folklore of every sort – as documents of the nation’s prehistory." Grimm’s Edda collection of songs was particularly important in advancing popular engagement with the ancient Nordic Gods and religions, a rich narrative seam that Richard Wagner mined in the Ring cycle, on which he began work in 1848 and completed in 1874. Odin became Wagner’s Wotan, Frigg became Frikka, Andwari became Alberich. The Wagner operas also gave the Nordic myths visual symbols, which were further developed by artists such as Friedrich Gunkel (1819–76), who produced a celebrated painting of the Battle of Teutoburg Forest in 9CE, with Hermann, mounted on a white horse, crushing the Roman legions of Quinctilius Varus, prompting the final withdrawal of the Romans from Magna Germania (Fig. 1).

Gunkel’s painting was completed in 1864, the year of the Second Schleswig War, after which the Duchies of Schleswig and Holstein were placed under Prussian and Austrian administration, respectively. Two years later, the Prussian army was victorious over Austria at the Battle of Königgrätz, and in 1870 defeated the French in the Franco-Prussian War. The climax of the Prussian advance towards military and political domination in Central Europe came on 18 January 1871 with the foundation of the German Empire, ruled by Kaiser Wilhelm I, when Wilhelm King of Prussia was declared Emperor of the German Reich. Exactly at this time, and not coincidentally, the painter Peter Janssen produced his own version of Hermann’s great victory, *Der siegreich vordringende Hermann* (Hermann advancing victoriously), 1870–73, now in the Lippisches Landesmuseum in Detmold. With the

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10 Gunkel’s painting of the Hermannschlacht was bought by the Bavarian King Maximilian II in 1857 but destroyed during the Second World War. It now exists only in photographs and reproductions.
founding of the new German state, the nationalist tendencies that had gained momentum over the preceding century took on heightened intensity and ambition. Across the spectrum of scholarship and the arts, history was ransacked for narratives that could support the message of German unity and national identity. The *Germanen* offered a particularly rewarding subject in this search.

**Monumentalising**

Architecture played a central role in giving tangible form to the desire for national unity, community, and shared history. Some 300 monuments were constructed between 1871 and the outbreak of the First World War. They were dedicated primarily to Kaiser Wilhelm I, who died on 1 March 1889, to Chancellor Otto von Bismarck, and to various military triumphs, both recent and historical. A typical example is the *Kaiser Wilhelm Monument* located at Porta Westfalica on the River Weser, built in 1892–96 to

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the design of the Berlin architect Bruno Schmitz. In common with virtually all of the monuments of this period, Schmitz’s tower sets a monumental, heroic statue within a massive stone vault. The vault, with its insistent buttresses and domed cap, is not unlike the conical Spangenhelm adopted by the Germanen around the 6th century, where the reinforcing framework of the helmet is formed by metal strips; Spangen in German. To make even more explicit the debt of the nation to the Kaiser and his Chancellor, a monument to Bismarck was built in 1902 on the neighbouring Jakobsberg in Porta Westfalica, directly facing the Kaiser Wilhelm Monument. It was to be one of a network of similar towers spread across the entire country, each topped by a fire bowl, which would be lit each year on Bismarck’s birthday on 1 April and on Midsummer’s day as a visible symbol of national community and connectivity modelled on the fire festivals of the Germanen such as Walpurgis Night (30 April / 1 May).

In the drive to characterise Germany as a strong and unified nation, the battle of Teutoburg Forest played a key role, and work on the Hermannsdenkmal (Hermann’s monument) near Detmold began in 1838 and was completed in 1875. A figure of Hermann, 26 meters high and made of riveted copper plates, stands on a circular sandstone drum of roughly the same height, composed of ten hexagonal columns that taper together to form a ring of very simplified, almost crude gothicky arches, which in turn support the shallow dome on which Hermann stands, waving his sword at the enemy. The long period of construction is evidence of a failing interest in the project in mid-century, which was only revived after the defeat of the French and the unification of 1871. Inscribed into the sword is the patriotic exhortation: ‘Deutsche Einigkeit meine Stärke, Meine Stärke Deutschlands Macht’ (German unity is my strength, my strength is Germany’s might). The designer of the monument was the architect and sculptor Ernst von Bandel, who had worked in the 1820s as an assistant to Leo von Klenze, the architect of the Walhalla in Regensburg. As Simon Schama concludes: ‘Von Bandel may not have been the most flamboyantly inspired of monumental sculptors but he evidently knew his public. He provided it with exactly the image of a Wagnerian hero it expected: whiskery, wing-helmeted, flourishing the invincibly tempered Nothung in the skies, a repatriated version of Tacitus’s Armenius as “the liberator of Germany”’.12 Besides commemorating Hermann’s

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12 Simon Schama, Landscape and Memory (London: Harper, 2004), 112. See the chapter ‘Arminius Redivivus’ in this book (100–120) for an overview of the revival of interest in the Germanen from the 18th to the early 20th centuries.


For a full account of these celebrations, see the publication of the organizing committee (Festausschuß), *Festbuch zur Neunzehnhundertjahrfeier der Schlacht im Teutoburger Walde* (Detmold: Meyersche Hofbuchdruckerei, 1909).

Victory over the Romans, the monument carries inscriptions that celebrate victory over Napoleon in 1813, the Battle of Waterloo, the fall of Paris in 1815 after the Battle of Issy, and, of course, the defeat of the French in the Franco-Prussian war of 1870. Further political messages were implicit, not least the battle of the new German imperial government against the power of the Roman Catholic Church in the *Kulturkampf* which raged from 1871 until 1887.13

Jacob Grimm’s *Deutsche Mythologie* reached a fourth edition in 1875/78 and the nationalist frenzy of the founding decades of the German Empire saw a flurry of scholarly publications on the *Germanen*.14 This agenda was further promoted at the start of the new century by the discussion around the *Urheimat*, the original and authentic homeland of the *Germanen*. Heinrich Beck explains: ‘While in the 19th century the view prevailed that the homeland of the original Indo-European peoples was in Asia (or the southern parts of Eastern Europe), now the hypothesis of the North German home of the Indo-Europeans became increasingly prominent.’15 This argument, which located the *Urheimat* of the *Germanen* in Northern Germany and on the Baltic shores, gained great traction around 1905, and a key figure in the debate was Johannes Hoops, who was the first editor of the four-volume edition of the *Reallexikon der Germanischen Altertumskunde*, published between 1911 and 1919. The article on the *Germanen* in the *Reallexikon* was written by Rudolf Much, Professor of Germanische Altertumskunde und Sprachgeschichte at the University of Vienna, who also contributed some 260 other articles to the *Reallexikon*. Although a deservedly distinguished scholar, Much was also an advocate of pan-Germanism and a member of the Catholic German-Nationalist Deutsche Gemeinschaft.16

**Ideological readings**

The charm of the new scholarship, which identified the folklore and history of the *Germanen* with modern-day Germany, had great appeal to popular nationalism. Symptomatically, 30,000 visitors travelled to Detmold and to the *Hermannsdenkmal* for the extended celebrations staged in August 1909 to mark the 1,900th anniversary of the victory over the Romans, with the urgings on national unity and might that are inscribed on Hermann’s sword repeated on postcards and souvenirs (Fig. 2).17 Predictably, the *Germanen*
antecedence attracted an ideologically-driven fringe. This can be represented by a book by Willibald Hentschel, published in 1904 and entitled *Mittgatt: Ein Weg zur Erneuerung der Germanischen Rasse* (Leipzig, 1904). This was a völkisch appeal for renewal of the German race, involving a colony of 1,000 women and 100 men, hand-picked for their racial purity, who would produce children in idyllic, rural surroundings. Marriage would only last until the woman became pregnant, at which point the father would start a new relationship aimed at the further procreation of the pure Germanic
race, which would settle across the land in protected, village-like communities. The existing cities, in contrast, would be left to the enfeebled and to the stipulated enemies of völkisch purity, the Jewish population. The goal was ‘to progress from the theoretical veneration of the Germanen species to its systematic nurturing’. In 1903, Hentschel was a joint founder with the publicist Theodor Fritsch of the extreme anti-Semitic journal Der Hammer, and the two men were behind a shortlived attempt to establish a ‘deutsch-völkische’ garden city named Heimland (homeland), near Ost-Priegnitz in the Mark Brandenburg.

**Werdandi-Bund**

A more moderate variation on the theme of a revival of Germanentum was offered by the Werdandi-Bund, which alluded in its name both to the Norn Verdhandi and to the German adjective werdend, meaning nascent, emerging, or about to happen. The title thus sought to link the distant past of Norse mythology with the future of the new German state. The group was established on May 1907 by Friedrich Seeßelberg, Professor of Architecture at the Technische Hochschule Charlottenburg in Berlin. Seeßelberg was an acknowledged expert on the art and architecture of the Germanen, and in 1897 published *Die Frueh-Mittelalterliche Kunst der Germanischen Voelker* under the subtitle of the book noted that it referred in particular to Scandinavian architecture and that its arguments were grounded on ethnological and anthropological evidence. The tone is strongly nationalist – an explicit goal is to promote ‘(...) the battle against world-citizenship and Jacobinism’ – and the opening chapter insists that the spread of Christianity and of the concomitant Romanesque art encountered the strongest resistance in Scandinavia in general and Norway in particular. Here the art and architecture adhered to structural and decorative models derived from the Germanen: ‘For in Scandinavia the heathen-Germanic art, based on its ancient stock of forms, both local and oriental, was able to continue to regenerate itself over several centuries, at a point when the Romanesque had at least in part already begun to force the national art in Germany out of its old course.’ Thus in Scandinavian models from the 12th century, such as the Norwegian stave churches or the churches at Østerlars and Aakirkeby on the island of Bornholm, Seeßelberg identified what he saw as autonomous Germanen building types.

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Illustrated by some 500 drawings, Seeßelberg’s book became a standard work of reference and was drawn on extensively in popularising surveys of German art. Easy public access to inexpensive illustrated books, photographs, maps, postcards of monuments and relics played an important role in the mythologising process. This affirms Benedict Anderson’s thesis that print-capitalism, as a broad societal practice rather than as an elite project, made it possible to understand distant antecedents as metaphorical kinsfolk, as part of an imagined community of the nation. Two examples of popular histories of German art, both heavily influenced by Seeßelberg’s work, were Hermann Knackfuss’s two-volume Deutsche Kunstgeschichte (1888) and Wilhelm Lübke’s Geschichte der deutschen Kunst: Von den frühesten Zeiten bis zur Gegenwart (1890). The nationalist passion that drove these publications becomes clear in the language used, and as paraphrased by Ehringhaus, these authors find ‘Germanic character’ in flat, linear ornamentation, which – in spite of its recourse to a unified language of form – also admits diversity and freedom. Similarly, wooden structures were seen to be Germanic thanks to their proximity to nature and to the forests. According to Lübke, ‘every German is by nature a carpenter’. In a similar vein, Knackfuss portrays the origin of the German race as an image, in Ehringhaus’s words, of sacral peace and calm, located ‘in the shadow of the mysteriously soughing, leafy canopy of the woods, under ancient trees (...).’ The destiny of the Germanen, however, was not simply to enjoy peace and calm under the Nordic forest canopy, and as Knackfuss explains: ‘It was not the destiny of this race to pursue its hunting and martial existence secluded in its woods. It overflowed its boundaries, destroyed the Roman Empire (...).’

Seeßelberg’s magisterial volume also informed specific studies of the art and architecture of the Germanen, such as Germanenkunst, by Hermann Popp (1910) and Albrecht Haupt’s Die älteste Kunst insbesondere die Baukunst der Germanen: Von der Völkerwanderung bis zu Karl dem Großen (1909). In the absence of surviving Germanen structures, however, nothing was certain, and Haupt admits that: ‘It should be once again stressed here that, while we cannot say that the oldest wooden churches of the Germanen looked like the Norwegian ones from the 12th to 14th centuries, they must at least have been similar,
in that they were built entirely of wood – beams, planks, and boards, cut and decorated in a similar configuration, created in exactly the same way by the hand of the Germanic carpenter.26 Seeßelberg’s engagement with the art and architecture of the Germanen, however, was not merely archaeological, but intended as a catalyst that would launch a new and specifically nationalist aesthetic impulse among the broader population of the nation.

This was the message of the book he published in 1907 with the programmatic title Volk und Kunst. The hero and guiding light of the manifesto-like text was Richard Wagner, and the cover illustration depicts a sword thrust into a tree: a clear reference to the first act of Die Walküre, where Siegmund finds the magical sword left for him in the tree by his father, Wotan. Seeßelberg’s aim was to extend Wagner’s understanding of art as religion into the realms of politics and governance. In contrast to the 19th century, which Seeßelberg dubs the ‘century of reason’, the new century is ready for a patriotism grounded in the arts and culture. By this he meant ‘(...) the holy German art. Not an art for Teutonic obsessives; not something conditioned by irretrievable ideas derived from of a faded era of the past, but an art that is appropriate to the age and borne by a serious German spirit.’27 Art was to replace religion and the new German art was to be the new religion. This he saw as a specifically German destiny: ‘It can be said in general, that only very few nations of the earth knew how to produce such an identity that joins the universe of nature and their spiritual essence as do the Germans – namely in the realm of myth.’28 He regarded Wagner’s theatre at Bayreuth as the epicentre of the dramatic and musical arts, but argued for a ‘temple’ in which the religious power of the arts would become manifest. ‘This also needs a locational centre – a sanctuary that awakes and sustains interest in the artistic consciousness – a sacred site. I am thinking of a temple; and by this I mean not only a notional structure but a very tangible, old-Germanic temple, in which from time to time the appointed German artists would meet to offer profound wisdom, exhibit their recent work, and seek in every way to serve the cause of art. It should become a great festival, at which our nation would once again embrace its art – and the visual arts would unite with the skaldic, musical, and poetic arts.’29


27 Friedrich Seeßelberg, Volk und Kunst (Berlin: Schuster, 1907), introduction, no pagination. ‘... so meine ich die heilige deutsche Kunst. Nicht eine Kunst für teutonische Tendenzler; nicht eine in unwiederbringliche Anschauungen eines verklungenen Zeitalters zurückgeschraubte, sondern eine zeitgemäße von ernstem deutschen Geiste getragenen Kunst ...’

28 Seeßelberg, Volk und Kunst, 122. ‘Doch darf im ganzen gesagt werden, daß nur sehr wenige Völker der Erde zwischen dem All der Natur und ihrem seelischen Ich eine solche Identität herzustellen wüßten, wie die Deutschen – namentlich im Mythischen.’

Exactly what an ‘old-Germanic’ temple would have looked like is, of course, a matter of some speculation, as no authentic structures had survived over the centuries. The extant relics were limited to pieces of jewellery, armour, metalwork, and stone carvings, but no building. According to Seeßelberg, the oldest Scandinavian churches were rectangular in plan, relatively long and narrow, with a small sanctuary at the eastern end, accessible via a narrow opening in the wall that divided the two sections. This was the model that he used in his reconstructive design of a Nordgermanisches Thinghaus, which he made in 1907. Between roughly the fifth and ninth centuries CE, Germanic law prevailed in Northern Germany and Scandinavia. A meeting of the legal court under this law, which was also an assembly of the people, was called a Thing, and the German terms for the site of the meeting were Thingplatz or Thingstätte. Seeßelberg’s Thinghaus is a large hall, with simple stone piers at floor level supporting lateral balconies, and also the massive wooden posts that carry a high pitched roof in which the principal trusses are triangulated: a very practical solution (Fig. 3). At one end, the sanctuary is structurally defined by giant stone pillars, and contains a massive, well over life-size figure of a warrior god (Fig. 4). Externally, the undressed stone walls are topped by a massive thatched roof and modest Nordic detailing – notably a dragon’s head on the gable end.

Idealism in the face of mechanistic realism and positivism was the goal of the Werdandi-Bund, which was seen as an antidote to the accelerating industrialisation of Germany. Its starting point was clearly stated in the group’s first yearbook, published in 1908, which was primarily to fight ‘the materialistic world view (…), which strives to reduce our life into a battle of everyone against everyone else for superficial advantages and pleasures, and recognises increasingly only those values that our shallow, times-table brains can convert into Marks and Pfennigs’.

The appeal of this call to the intelligentsia was extraordinary, and dozens of distinguished figures from the world of literature and the arts joined the Werdandi-Bund, drawn from a broad spectrum of the German intelligentsia. From the extreme, anti-Semitic right came the historian Arthur Moeller van den Bruck, the Wagnerian devotee and race theorist Houston Stewart Chamberlain, and ideologues like Friedrich Lienhard and Adolf Bartels. But more moderate voices were also attracted to the group: the writers Wilhelm...
Fig. 3. Friedrich Seeßelberg, Reconstructive design for a Thinghaus, 1907, interior. Architekturmuseum, TU Berlin

Fig. 4. Friedrich Seeßelberg, Reconstructive design for a Thinghaus, 1907, section. Architekturmuseum, TU Berlin
Busch, Wilhelm Raabe, Detlev von Liliencron, Carl Hauptmann, Julius Hart, Richard Voß, and the Wagner biographer Hans von Wolzogen. The membership included composers like Engelbert Humperdinck, Hans Pfitzner, Hugo Wolf; the painters Hans Thoma, Max Klinger, and several members of the Worpswede group. In alignment with Seeßelberg’s own profession, architecture was also well represented by Richard Riemerschmid, Bruno Schmitz, Bruno Möhring, Paul Schultze-Naumburg, Emanuel von Seidl, and Friedrich von Thiersch.31

As stated in its manifesto, the aim of the organisation was straightforward: ‘to conserve and reinforce the particular qualities and spiritual strength of the German people through the means of art.’32 Seeßelberg, as already noted, however, was both a devotee of the semi-mythological Germanen and also a modernist, who taught architectural design at a progressive school of architecture. As Rolf Parr has noted, the Werdandi-Bund squared this circle by pressing the artists to be simultaneously grounded in Germanen culture, while fearlessly pushing forward into the uncharted world of the future: ‘From the outset, the solution of this contradiction was a strategy that attempted to pair the “preserving old” (German) elements and the “innovative modern” (individual artistic) ones.’33 In this way, the Werdandi-Bund located itself between the ultra-conservative forces of the anti-modernist and chauvinist Bund Heimatschutz and the progressive optimism of the Deutscher Werkbund, which was founded in 1907 to promote German design and industry. Indeed, many members of the Werdandi-Bund were also in the Bund Heimatschutz, while others – more progressive in spirit – were also in the Werkbund. All three initiatives, however, were united in their fundamental belief in a social-Darwinian struggle between nations for cultural and economic supremacy. Given the European political landscape at this time, and the consolidation of the Triple Entente (France, Russia, and Great Britain) and the Triple Alliance (Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Italy), this was not entirely surprising.

Modernism and primitivism

It should also be noted that the emerging avant-garde impulses in the arts in the years leading up to the outbreak of the First World War invariably sought to justify and authenticate their radical
positions with reference to primitive and primeval antecedents. Thus in the German context the painters of the group *Die Brücke*, established in Dresden in 1905, looked to anthropological evidence and sculpture from the German colonies in Africa and Oceania in their search for models that were ‘genuine’ and ‘direct’. Similarly Franz Marc, in *Der Blaue Reiter Almanac*, published in 1912, dubbed the painters of the Blaue Reiter as ‘the savages’ (*Wilden*) of Germany, as primitives whose radical position in the arts was grounded in the primeval: ‘Mysticism awakes in the souls and with it primeval elements of art.’

August Macke’s essay ‘Die Maske’ in the same volume, is illustrated with photographs of sculpture and reliefs from Easter Island, Cameroon, Mexico, and New Caledonia. The attempts of the Werdandi-Bund to reconcile and somehow unite a passionate interest in the ancient cultures of the *Germanen* with the desire to produce an avowedly modern art should be seen in this broader context.

Seeßelberg’s own efforts as an architect to square this circle resulted in two exhibition pavilions for the Werdandi-Bund. The first, installed at the 1913 Leipzig Baufachausstellung (Building Industry Exhibition) was designed in collaboration with Max Taut, one of his assistants in the architecture faculty at the Technische Hochschule in Berlin. The pavilion was highly innovative, both structurally and architecturally, and made a radical statement about modern building technology. The tall columns that form the building frame and support the roof truss were formed from reinforced concrete. Their slenderness is particularly striking, and marks a very bold and confident use of a relatively new and untried building material (Fig. 5). The four external elevations were very plain, with the exposed structural frame as the only decoration. The frames also serve to articulate and decorate the space in the interior. In this basic formula of exposed structural frame and simple elevations, the Leipzig Pavilion can be seen as a distant relation, but nevertheless a relation, of Seeßelberg’s ‘*Thinghaus*’. Both are strongly-articulated enclosures that propose aesthetic and polemical positions, and the two designs employ equivalent technologies, one in timber and the other in reinforced concrete. The lingering memory of victories of the *Germanen* against foreign foes and intruders would also have been stirred by the very siting of the Baufachausstellung, which was set on an axis that extended to the gigantic *Völkerschlachtdenkmal* (Monument to the Battle of the Nations).
to the Battle of the Nations), built to the design of Bruno Schmitz and inaugurated on 13 October 1913 to commemorate the defeat of the Napoleonic army in 1813.

This retrospective and nationalistic reading, although supportable, only represents one side of the story, however, as Seeßelberg and the Werdandi-Bund also had their eyes firmly fixed on the future. As the official account of the Leipzig exhibition noted: ‘The Werdandi-Bund (...) adheres to the principle that every building idea must, above all, be derived from the demands of
construction and function, so that while avoiding any unnecessary expense, the fulfillment of these demands automatically satisfies the aesthetic requirements.'35 This was to become the recurring mantra of architectural modernism as it gained traction in the 1920s. Under the Werdandi-Bund flag, Seeßelberg published a book that appeared in five editions between 1900 and 1914, in which he argued in favour of the flat roof, thus contradicting the conservative, *Heimatkunst* position, which insisted that the pitched roof was the only truly ‘German’ option.36 This openness to technologically-progressive design also found an expression in the interior of the Werdandi-Bund Pavilion in Leipzig, where the main concrete structural frames also served to form the partitions between the display booths, which featured modern, synthetic building materials, such as face bricks, cast cement stone, bitumen roofing felt, and corrugated sheet iron. These, it was argued, would be aesthetically acceptable in the traditional landscape. The interior display also featured what the official report described as ‘a rich collection of pictures of extremely worthwhile new building – particularly built in brick – in the spirit of the 20th century’.37 Seeßelberg and Max Taut went on to design a similarly striking exhibition pavilion for Werdandi-Bund, which was installed at the Baltic Exhibition in Malmö, Sweden, in 1914. Taut became one of the leading modernist architects in Germany in the 1920s and up until his death in 1967.

**Radical conservative architecture in the Weimar Republic**

While the Werdandi-Bund foundered with the outbreak of the First World War, the Bund Heimatschutz prospered. Rebranded in 1914 as the Deutscher Bund Heimatschutz, by 1916 it functioned as an umbrella organisation to some 250 affiliated groups. In the years of the Weimar Republic the architectural debate in Germany became a battleground between the conservatives in the Heimatschutz lobby and the modernists who coalesced around the Ring group in Berlin. The symbolic epicentre of this struggle was the roof: pitched and Germanic for the former, flat for the latter. The flat roof, which Seeßelberg had advocated in 1912, became identified by right-wing conservatives such as Paul Schultz-Naumburg – a one-time member of the Werdandi-Bund and founder member of the Bund Heimatschutz – as the despised...
symbol of a flawed modernism, which was also identified with *Kulturbolschewismus* (cultural Bolshevism). Writing in 1922, he despaired at ‘(…) the deplorable disappearance of love for the native land, the unpardonable spread of an international democracy, that no longer bonds with the soil’. The debate over the flat versus pitched roof climaxed in 1927, when the modernist wing built the Weissenhof Estate at Stuttgart, and Schultze-Naumburg hit back with his polemic *Flaches oder geneigtes Dach* (Flat or pitched roof), in which he argued that the form of the house was linked to racial origin: ‘Thus every people, in as far as it is in some way racially homogeneous or derives its physiognomy from a particularly creative race, knows that its houses have a particular physiognomy.’ Clearly, the Nordic *Germanen* were the ‘particularly creative race’ in question.

More substantially, the conservative lobby built a rival estate at the Kochenhof in Stuttgart in 1933. It was subsidised by the timber industry and the design guidelines, drawn up by the architect Paul Schmitthenner, specified that all the buildings be constructed from wood, with pitched roofs throughout, including outhouses. In this context, the flat roof was a metaphor for race and specifically for non-Germanness, and the proposition that the pitched roof was linked to blood and race sits easily with Schultze-Naumburg’s other publications on race and art, such as *Rassengebundene Kunst* (Art determined by race), *Kunst aus Blut und Boden* (Art from blood and soil), both published in 1934, and *Nordische Schönheit: Ihr Wunschbild im Leben und in der Kunst* (Nordic beauty: Its ideal in life and art, 1937). Under the National Socialists, art was intended to serve ideology, as Schultze-Naumburg wrote in *Rassengebundene Kunst*: ‘No other concept is so influential for the entire world view of the new state as blood and soil. Only art can make visible to us the racial target.’

**National Socialism and the Germanen**

An essay on cultural mythologies around 1900 is not the occasion for a detailed study of the impact on National Socialist politics of the cultural conservatism that flourished at the start of the century, nor for an exegesis on the revival of occultism, ‘Wotanism’, and the like. Similarly, it is not a vehicle for the investigation of the unhealthily close relationship between the National Socialist party and many professional German archaeologists,

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42 On Wotanism, Germanic Theosophy, the Armanenschaft, and similar, see Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, *The Occult Roots of Nazism: Secret Aryan Cults and their Influence on Nazi Ideology* (London: Tauris Parke, 2004).
who laboured to produce proof of the racial superiority of the Germanic races and offered pseudo-racial justifications for the aggressive expansionism of the Third Reich. The thesis that the Urheimat (original home) of the Indo-Europeans was not, in fact, Asia or the southern parts of eastern Europe, but was actually in the northern Europe of the Germanen was readily adopted by the ideologues of National Socialism. It reappears, for example, in the first chapter of Alfred Rosenberg’s Der Mythus des 20. Jahrhunderts, entitled ‘Rasse und Rassenseele’, which describes how the ‘world’ was ‘colonised’ by the Germanic tribes that had migrated eastwards to Persia and India.

An excursus on the architectural impact of neo-Germanism, however, can be justified as evidence of the lasting power of this impulse. A very direct example of the recycling and reinvigoration of the 19th-century Germanen cult can be seen in a postcard from the National Socialist period, showing two members of the Hitler Youth saluting the Hermannsdenkmal (Fig. 6). The text on the card reads: ‘Where the leader of the Germanen once freed the German land from the enemy, Hitler’s victory flag now waves mightily in the new era.’

Fig. 6. The Hermannsdenkmal, shown in a postcard from the National Socialist era
Fig. 7. Reconstruction drawing of a Germanische Kulthalle, in Hermann Wille, *Germanische Gotteshäuser zwischen Weser und Ems*, 1933

Fig. 8. Hans Mallon Monument, Rügen, in *Kriegsgräberfürsorge: Mitteilungen und Berichte aus dem Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge*, February 1939
of pseudo-scholarly interest and as a design model. In 1933, the architect Hermann Wille published *Germanische Gotteshäuser zwischen Weser und Ems* (Leipzig), with a high-pitched *Thinghaus* on the cover and reconstruction drawings of Germanic building types (Fig. 7).

The opening sentence reads: ‘The aim of this book is to awaken and encourage love of the native land [Heimat] and pride in Nordic ethnicity. (...) We must look back to the journey that our fathers have made from primordial times to the present. We must attempt to immerse ourselves in the innermost essence, in the soul of our race, in the Germanness to which we are born.’

Wille was also involved in the design of the *Hans-Mallon-Ehrenmal* (Hans Mallon Monument) on the island of Rügen in the Baltic Sea (Fig. 8). Hans Mallon was a member of the Hitler Youth, who died in September 1931 as the result of a fight with left-wing sympathisers. The monument was intentionally designed ‘with reference to primeval German constructional methods’. The temple itself was a timber-frame structure with a high-pitched thatched roof. On the inside, Hans Mallon’s gravestone was set under a massive stone altar, in front of which was set a vault containing earth from the battlefields of the First World War. The historian Saul Friedlander has tellingly written about the confluence in National Socialist aesthetics of kitsch and death: ‘Kitsch is a debased form of myth, but nevertheless draws from the mythic substance – a part of its emotional impact – the death of a hero; the eternal march, the twilight of the gods; myth is a footprint, an echo of lost worlds, haunting an imagination invaded by excessive rationality and thus becoming the crystallisation point for the thrusts of the archaic and the irrational.’

The *Hans Mallon Monument* is a perfect example of Friedlander’s thesis.

**Thingstätte**

The initial plans for the monument on Rügen by the architect Robert Tischler, a leading figure in the German War Graves Commission, also included a *Thingstätte*. This was an open-air amphitheatre designed to host gatherings of the party faithful, that referred back in its nomenclature to the ancient Germanic judicial and social gathering, the *Thing*. Twelve hundred *Thingplätze* were planned by the National Socialists, and specifically by Joseph Goebbels’ Propaganda Ministry, ranging in scale from the modest enterprise on Rügen to a gigantic but unbuilt structure in the coal-mining...
town of Gelsenkirchen, intended for an audience of 200,000. Only 45 were built, however, before the party’s interest in the project faded after 1937, and vanished with the outbreak of war in 1939.  

The most famous was the *Dietrich-Eckart-Bühne* (Dietrich Eckart stage), which was constructed in 1936 for the Olympic Games in Berlin. Dietrich Eckart was a poet and journalist, and also the spiritual father of the party. He was Hitler’s mentor and model in the early 1920s, and the first editor of the party newspaper, the *Völkischer Beobachter*. Werner March, the architect of the *Dietrich-Eckart-Bühne* and the neighbouring Olympic stadium, described the theatre as a site for ‘sacred musical drama and nationalistic celebrations’. In July 1936, 1,200 working men took part in a performance there of Eberhard Wolfgang Möller’s *Frankenburger Würfelspiel*, commissioned by Josef Goebbels and

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**Fig. 9. Freikorps Monument on the Annaberg with Thingstätte in the foreground, in *Die Kunst im Dritten Reich*, March 1939**

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performed as part of the artistic programme of the Olympics. It was a retelling of a tale dating back to 1626 and the outbreak of the Peasant’s War in Upper Austria.

Another completed, but more historically burdened Thingstätte was built beside a monument to the Freikorps on the Annaberg Mountain (now Góra Świętej Anny, Poland). The Freikorps was made up of those elements of the defeated army who took up arms in 1918 and 1919 against the socialist uprising in Germany. The circular stone monument was set on a hill above a limestone rock face, with the Thingstätte below (Fig. 9). The architectural precedent was the Tannenberg Memorial, completed in 1927 to honour the German soldiers who had fallen at the Battle of Tannenberg in 1914 and also at a previous battle on the same site in 1410. The leader of the design team was Robert Tischler and, as at the Hans Mallon Monument on Rügen, the graves of the heroes...
were composed of massive, altar-like stone blocks, set in arched niches around the perimeter of the domed space (Fig. 10). At the centre of the circle, a sculpture of a warrior stirring from his sleep symbolised the awakening of the German nation under National Socialism. The ashlar masonry was simple in the extreme, echoing the primevality of the *Kulthaus* of the *Germanen* in spirit, if not in form. As described in the official art journal *Die Kunst im Dritten Reich*: ‘After the collapse of 1918, Upper Silesia was the site of heavy fighting. The *Freikorps* and self-defence units defended the borderlands against the enemy advancing from the east and the traitors in our own land. In the memorial on the Annaberg, 51 *Freikorps* fighters who fell in storming this hill in 1921, have found their final peace.’\(^{53}\)

**Conclusion**

It would be reassuring to think that myth-making histories of the *Germanen* had expired with National Socialism, but this is clearly not the case. While radical voices like that of the painter Anselm Kiefer return repeatedly and obsessively to the 19th-century portrayals of *Germanen* cultural identity in order to critique the horrors of National Socialism, the neo-Fascists in Germany and Scandinavia revisit them with approval. Danger still lurks in the dark northern forests.

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