



Quaestiones Medii Aevi Novae

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♦ *EARLY MEDIEVAL SCANDINAVIA:*

NEW TRENDS IN RESEARCH

♦ *PRUSSICA*

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HALLS HAUNTED BY THE PAST: OLD GERMANIC HERITAGE AND “VÖLKISCH” ARCHITECTURE IN THE GERMAN EMPIRE



The years from the Napoleonic wars up to the foundation of the German Empire in 1871 saw many different attempts to define the nation via the essence of being German, the foundational and thus glorified German Middle Ages providing a baseline to this tune. After the political unification of 1871, the need to define *deutsches Wesen*, i.e. what was German by essence, remained heartfelt. The rise of the *völkische Bewegung* (*völkisch* movement) – or rather movements, as it was a highly heterogeneous phenomenon and anything but a single group of people, organization or political party – had earlier been regarded as a post-war phenomenon of the Weimar Republic and a direct precursor to National Socialism, but more recent scholarship has demonstrated that the phenomenon was already virulent and deeply rooted in the decennia before World War I.¹ The *völkische Weltanschauung*, a heterogenous set of feelings, beliefs, ideas, and visions, was a formative force behind the upcoming of a multitude of more or less well-defined groups, clubs, and associations in Imperial Germany.² Dominant within this quest for identity were attempts

1 Cf. U. Puschner, “One People, One Reich, One God.” *The Völkische Weltanschauung and Movement*, “German Historical Institute London Bulletin” XXIV (2002), pp. 5-28, here pp. 5-6. The article relies on his profound book-length study *Die völkische Bewegung im wilhelminischen Kaiserreich: Sprache, Rasse, Religion*, Darmstadt 2001; cf. also the review by T.C.W. Blanning in “German Historical Institute London Bulletin” XXIV (2002), pp. 94-97.

2 Cf. U. Puschner, *Die völkische Bewegung...*, passim; *Handbuch zur “Völkischen Bewegung” 1871-1918*, eds. U. Puschner, W. Schmitz, J.H. Ulbricht, München-New Providence-London-Paris 1996, passim; *Handbuch literarisch-kultureller Vereine, Gruppen und Bünde 1825-1933*, eds. W. Wülfing, K. Bruns, R. Parr, Stuttgart-Weimar 1998; R. Parr, *Interdiskursive As-Sociation: Studien zu literarisch-kulturellen Gruppierungen zwischen Vormärz und Weimarer Republik*, Studien und

to relate to “Germanic” prehistory or the German Middle Ages, assuming that there was a national continuity from ancient times to then present-day Germany. The *lieux de memoire* (places of remembrance) cultivated by the *völkisch* movement addressed the long line of history and included e.g. Germanic prehistory, Arminius and the later medieval German emperors as well as the national genius, the place of desire “German forest” and new national mythologies constructed on the basis of what was perceived as Germanic cultural heritage, as for example in form of the works of Richard Wagner. Thus, the *völkisch* circles’ inventories of places of remembrance did not necessarily contrast with the overarching national ones – for all of their at times esoteric qualities, the *völkisch* movement(s) of the German Empire were a product of and at least to a large extent firmly rooted in the greater bourgeois milieu. What singled them out can perhaps rather be perceived in their attitude and the degree of commitment – a stronger feeling of loss and that what was lost had to be regained, a deeper scepticism towards modernity and industrialisation and thus a more radical turning to the past, unfulfilled spiritual needs and a stronger longing for a holistic world view and, for the most, a higher degree of nationalism.

Among those active within the circles of the *völkisch* movement was the Berlin painter Hermann Hendrich (1864-1931) who, through his connections, managed to raise funding and build several exhibition halls in order to get his paintings displayed. In the present article, these halls, especially the Walpurgishalle (referring to the witches’ Sabbath celebrated on Walpurgis Night, the night to 1 May) erected at the Hexentanzplatz (“the Witches’ dance-ground”) near the city of Thale in the Harz region, will serve as the main case to demonstrate how history, art, and religion were merged with cultural pessimism and a romantic longing for wholeness and closeness to nature within visions of the past and a construction of German identity by the *völkisch* movement. The points of reference and the applied mechanisms are still of high relevance today as various radical groups of the far-right, the post-World War II Identitarian movement and partly neo-pagan groups tread the same paths,³ and the actual sites such as the Hexentanzplatz can also be blind spots in the sense that they are advertised for tourists and used today, but without any sufficient clarification of their former and present uses by *völkisch* or far-right groups.

Hermann Hendrich was born 31 October 1864 in Heringen/Harz. After commencing an apprenticeship as a lithographer in Nordhausen, he moved on

Texte zur Sozialgeschichte der Literatur, LXXV, Tübingen 2000, passim; J.U. Ulbricht, “Bünde Deutsche Lichtkämpfer”. *Lebensreform und völkische Bewegung*, in: *Die Lebensreform. Entwürfe zur Neugestaltung von Leben und Kunst um 1900*, eds. K. Buchholz, R. Latocha, H. Peckemann, I-II, Darmstadt 2001, here I, pp. 425-428.

3 Cf. S. von Schnurbein, *Norse Revival. Transformations of Germanic Neopaganism*, Studies in Critical Research on Religion, V, Leiden-Boston 2016, passim.

to Hannover and Berlin, worked at theatres in Detmold and Dusseldorf and devoted himself fully to painting, with stays in Berlin, Amsterdam and the U.S.; back in Germany, he studied painting with Joseph Wenglein in Munich and then with Eugen Bracht in Berlin.⁴ Strongly influenced by Arnold Böcklin but without reaching the same level of quality, he was inspired by Richard Wagner's operas⁵ and Nordic folktales, fairy tales, gothic themes and myth and turned them into art. Thus, he created both individual paintings and cycles round *The Flying Dutchman*, *Tannhäuser*, *The Ring of the Nibelung* and *Parsifal* as well as on other tales, epics and myth, e.g. *Beowulf*, *Grimms' Fairy Tales* and on tales from the Riesengebirge (Pol.: Karkonosze).⁶ With this focus on national-romantic themes, he had some success in the 1880s and 1890s. Even the German Emperor Wilhelm II owned some paintings by Hendrich and commissioned one to be made for him (entitled *Atlantis*), others were acquired by the Grand Duke of Oldenburg and a number of museums.⁷ Still, the most lasting impact Hendrich had was through his networks, as one might call it today, and the architecture he managed to get built for his paintings.

As for his networks and his own role in them, they mirror the complexity of the bourgeois milieus of his time. Via a multitude of personal networks and a broad range of groups and associations with fuzzy borders which in addition overlapped as many of their members were at the same time members in other groups, the *völkisch* movement, regarded from outside these circles, looked very much like patchwork and their world view rather diffuse and complex. At the same time, these tightly woven networks and the numberless links between each other, as well as the fluidity amongst the *völkisch*, nationalist and antimodernist or culturally-critical milieus provided the basis for the wide distribution of *völkisch* thought in Imperial Germany.⁸ This fermentation vat of overlapping heterogenous milieus took up Nietzschean art-religion and the idea that Germany needed a spiritual renewal facilitated by combining the aesthetic heritage with "leading spirits"⁹ and generated an inextricable amount of scholarly¹⁰ and popular works such as Julius Langbehn's *Rembrandt als Erzieher* (1890) and Willy Pastor's *Der Zug vom Norden* (1906).

4 *Allgemeines Lexikon der bildenden Künste*, XVI, eds. U. Thieme, F. Becker, Leipzig 1923, p. 379.

5 In his own view not operas but *Gesamtkunstwerke*, total art works.

6 *Allgemeines Lexikon...*, p. 379; cf. also A. Koeppen, *Hermann Hendrich und seine Tempelkunst*, "Westermanns Monatshefte" CIII (1908), pp. 651-662, here p. 654.

7 *Allgemeines Lexikon...*, p. 379.

8 Cf. U. Puschner, *Die völkische Bewegung...*, p. 280.

9 S. von Schnurbein, *Norse Revival...*, pp. 306-308.

10 Cf. e.g. I. Wiwjorra, *Der Germanenmythos. Konstruktion einer Weltanschauung in der Altertumsforschung des 19. Jahrhunderts*, Darmstadt 2006.

Hendrich himself was a member of the association Edda and of two Berlin-based literary-cultural associations, the Neue Klause and the Werdandi-Bund. *Edda* aimed at the “rebirth of German art and German crafts in a national sense.”¹¹ The Neue Klause (1892-1897) wanted to support German poetry via recitations and lectures; after a somewhat humorous and carnivalesque start, it became more national and anti-modern round 1895, now having a stronger focus on traditional popular genres such as folksongs and fairy tales, and a stronger national tone can be observed in its newsletters (*Mitteilungen*).¹² Hendrich was one of the founders of the Werdandi-Bund in 1907. Named after one of the norns of Old Norse mythology (Urð, Verðandi and Skuld, mentioned in the Eddic poem *Völuspá*, Verðandi meaning the present or nascent), it served the purpose, in the words of its president Friedrich Seeßelberg, to “give those artists, whose art is based on a healthy German foundation of the soul, greater and more direct influence on culture” and to “preserve and strengthen the particular and the power of the soul of the German people by the means of art”, goals fully shared by Hendrich,¹³ but certainly not by progressive German contemporaries.¹⁴ Still, there were many members with memberships of both the Werdandi-Bund and the innovative Deutscher Werkbund (also founded in 1907) as the Werdandi-Bund, in spite of its conservative and culturally critical orientation as such, was welcoming modern technologies and inventions, very much in line with the bourgeois background of its members, mainly doctors, professors, lawyers, journalists, artists, and industrialists.¹⁵

Such mythological references were much to the taste of Hendrich who was a member of the Deutschgläubige Gemeinschaft (“German Faith Community”) since 1914, earlier Deutschreligiöse Gemeinschaft (“German Religious Community”), a sworn community of neo-pagans who had left the church officially.¹⁶ Around the turn of the century, when the interest in Hendrich’s art diminished, he successfully tried to have exhibition halls built for his paintings. These were not mere functional buildings serving the purpose, though – Hendrich ensured a (to his taste) perfect match between his paintings and the architecture. At the same time, the new localities allowed

11 R. Parr, *Interdiskursive As-Sociation...*, p. 50.

12 K. Bruns, *Neue Klause*, in: *Handbuch literarisch-kultureller...*, pp. 371-384.

13 Cf. R. Parr, *Werdandi-Bund*, in: *Handbuch literarisch-kultureller...*, pp. 485-495, here p. 485; cf. R. Parr, *Interdiskursive As-Sociation...*, pp. 167-172 and U. Puschner, *Die völkische Bewegung...*, pp. 132f.; on Hendrich’s grammatics cf. A. Koeppen, *Hermann Hendrich...*, p. 662.

14 Cf. e.g. the sarcastic article by K. Scheffler, *Werdandi*, “Kunst und Künstler” VI (1908), pp. 195-199, reprinted in R. Parr, *Interdiskursive As-Sociation...*, pp. 222-225.

15 R. Parr, *Interdiskursive As-Sociation...*, pp. 65-68.

16 S. von Schnurbein, *Norse Revival...*, p. 318, see also pp. 40-49; S. Breuer, *Die Völkischen in Deutschland. Kaiserreich und Weimarer Republik*, Darmstadt 2008, pp. 95-97.

him to give his pictures more monumental dimensions and appearances. These halls can be regarded as the ardent Wagnerian Hendrich's own form of total art, combining art, architecture and a mythologically charged natural setting which answered strongly to neo-pagan needs of alternative cult places and places of remembrance of their own. The first of them was the Walpurgishalle (Thale 1901), two years later the Riesengebirgshalle (Szklarska Poręba/Schreiberhau 1903), then after a lot of difficulties the Nibelungenhalle (Königswinter 1913), and finally, as a late offshoot and not on his initiative, a fourth hall, Deutscher Sagenring (Burg a.d. Wupper 1926).¹⁷

Hendrich's halls differed a great deal in style; still, all of them eclectically addressed distant pasts not just via the paintings, but also through architecture and holistic programs of figural decorations. They combined massive proportions with elements from medieval Scandinavian wooden architecture (Walpurgishalle and Riesengebirgshalle) or from pre-historic and medievalist imagination. Inside, they provided interior spaces of sacral character – an intended aesthetic effect, as was clearly pointed out by Hendrich's contemporary Alfred Koeppen in his article *Hermann Hendrich und seine Tempelkunst* (H.H. and his temple art) in "Westermanns Monatshefte" in 1908, a journal highly popular in the bourgeois milieu (appeared 1856-1987): He characterizes the Walpurgishalle as "a defiant hall-building filled with German spirit", inwardly resembling a temple and taking the spectator back into a strange past through its symbolic ornaments.¹⁸ A cycle of monumental paintings show motives of Walpurgis and the witches' Sabbath taken from or freely imagined on the basis of Goethe's *Faust* drama. In these paintings, Koeppen sees "the spirit from times immemorial risen from the dead in a deeply-felt symbolic *gestalt*." And he points to the intimate connection between landscape and human soul:

Inasmuch as the atmospheric content of the landscape entered an essential soul-wise concord with man, and as there has been found a generous form with an almost decorative effect, the monumental stepped into its own right.¹⁹

Models and inspirations for the design of the Walpurgishalle spring from a variety of sources: the medieval and contemporary Norwegian wood

¹⁷ J.E. Schnall, K. Stoverock, "Ein Ehrendom unserer Mythe" – die Nibelungenhalle, in: *Rheinreise 2002. Der Drachenfels als romantisches Reiseziel*, eds. E. Scheuren, H. Stoverock, Bonn 2002, pp. 152-161; J.E. Schnall, *Zementiertes Deutschland – Wagner, Siegfried und andere Götter in der Nibelungenhalle zu Königswinter*, in: *Runica – Germania – Mediaevalia*, eds. W. Heizmann, A. van Nahl, Ergänzungsbände zum Reallexikon der Germanischen Altertumskunde, XXXVII, Berlin-New York 2003, pp. 727-758; S. von Schnurbein, *Norse Revival...*, pp. 318-320.

¹⁸ A. Koeppen, *Hermann Hendrich...*, p. 656.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*.

architecture, the so-called dragon style, scholarly and popular works on Germanic prehistory, his admiration for Richard Wagner and his total art works, medievalist and other popular imaginations of a Germanic-German past and ideas about the aesthetics of materials – but also Hendrichs practical experience, as several traits of his wooden halls show strong similarities with typical stage sets for performances of Wagner’s operas or Friedrich Hebbel’s drama *Die Nibelungen*.

There is good reason to assume a direct or indirect influence by Norwegian wood architecture. In 1876, Hendrich had the opportunity to accompany a Norwegian fellow student to his home country and see landscape and architecture with his own eyes; 1885 was spent on a second study trip to Norway. He had access to illustrated publications of both Viking Age finds (the Gokstad excavation being published 1882) and thorough studies of medieval and contemporary wood architecture (such as L. Dietrichson, H. Munthe, *Die Holzbaukunst Norwegens in Vergangenheit und Gegenwart*, Berlin 1893). Holm Hansen Munthe (1848-1898), architect of the famous Holmenkollen Turisthotell (1889, burnt 1895) and the Frognerstegen (1890) draws some parallels between Wagner’s reception of *Edda* and *Nibelungenlied* on the one hand and contemporary reception of Norwegian wood architecture in Germany on the other: Perhaps the Norwegian wood architecture could bring an “element of freshness and earthiness not to be underestimated” to German art.²⁰

The Dragon style, taking up features from stave church architecture and Viking Age wood-carving was also mediated to the German Empire by Munthe, supported not least by the German Emperor Wilhelm II. He had Munthe build e.g. the royal yacht station *Kongsnäs* at Potsdam and later the hunting lodge Rominten in East Prussia. At the turn of the century, the animal ornaments of the Dragon style were merged and brought to a synthesis with forms of the Art Nouveau. As for the Walpurgishalle, there are obvious and significant differences between its style and the Art Nouveau. The wood carvings are rough and far less detailed, and the wooden elements show rather massive proportions, directing the focus towards the building materials as such. This has a lot to do with a certain branch of material aesthetics of the time that would ascribe positive value to the formless, nature-like, unrefined. Special significance was perceived in wood as the most original of all building materials used by Germanic peoples. A deep emotional connection to the forest and wood as material was postulated, a connection that still was lingering under the surface in contemporary Germany. The first edition of Hoops’ *Reallexikon der germanischen Altertumskunde* (1911-1919) has in its article on wood architecture:

²⁰ L. Dietrichson, H. Munthe, *Die Holzbaukunst Norwegens in Vergangenheit und Gegenwart*, Berlin 1893, p. 128.

The love for the native forest, which one had to thank for protection, food, clothing, housing, in short: almost everything, and for the type of architecture derived from it, has been preserved among the Germanic people as an inheritance up to the present day.²¹

The material aesthetics connected to wood are clearly visible also at Hendrich's second hall, the Sagenhalle ("Hall of Folktales") in Szklarska Poręba/Schreiberhau, now lost. It was built by the architect Paul Engler in 1903, and like the Walpurgishalle two years earlier, it was a "Nordic" wooden house on a base of natural stone and presented a detailed mythological program in its figural decoration. The intended aesthetic effect was an "atmosphere of fairytale twilight" in which the visitor could muse on the Midgard Serpent, Wodan's eye, his spear with the runic inscription "Saga, mach' sehend" ("Saga, make us see"), an "Old German oath ring", Thor's hammer and Wotan's likewise rune-adorned sword.²² The folklore mountain spirit Rübzahl (Liczyrzepa) of Hendrich's paintings is integrated into the Old-Norse-Germanic mythology, being assigned positive traits and identified with Wotan. According to Hendrich's contemporary, Alfred Koeppen, Rübzahl-Wotan was to be understood as spring personified and as such a manifestation of cosmologic phenomena.

The Nibelungenhalle at the Drachenfels was built in 1913 as a Richard-Wagner-Memorial Hall in honour of his 100th birthday. It houses a cycle of twelve paintings on the *Ring of the Nibelung*, three for each of the operas. They are embedded in a very detailed holistic concept comprising the architecture itself, the figural decorations both on the inside and the outside, the wooden carved frames of the pictures, the light design via differently coloured windows and the permanent playing of Wagner's music. On the floor, the world serpent encircles a hexagram. The hall itself was erected in a natural setting which was part of the program – the hall in total is an amalgamation of nature-mystic ideas, *völkisch* symbolism, Nordic-Germanic mythology and references to Wagner's works, all presented as a cosmic whole within the annual cycle.²³

Here, a different and even more monumental material aesthetics can be observed, and also the form of the building evokes other associations.²⁴ A memorial hall with massive columns and other monumental elements

21 A. Haupt, *Holzbau. A. Deutschland und der Norden*, in: *Reallexikon der germanischen Altertumskunde*, II, ed. J. Hoops, Straßburg 1915, p. 557.

22 A. Koeppen, *Hermann Hendrich...*, p. 659.

23 Cf. J.E. Schnall, *Zementiertes Deutschtum...*, pp. 727-758.

24 On material aesthetics cf. D. Mersch, *Deutsche Materialästhetik*, in: *Die Lebensreform...*, pp. 267-269.

of stone point to models such as the Burschenschaftsdenkmal at Eisenach. A material aesthetics with the raw, hard, and mighty as an ideal connects well to an interest in Germanic prehistory and scholarly or esoteric literature about it. Willy Pastor, a *völkisch* publicist, member of prehistoric associations and later like Hendrich a member of the Werdandi-Bund, links the movement of erratic blocks with the alleged migration of Germanic peoples from the north in his book *Altgermanische Monumentalkunst* (1910).

The program of the paintings in the Nibelungenhalle interprets the Nibelung cycle in a nature-mythological way, Siegfried being associated with light and his cult with a sun cult. This relates to a book popular in *völkisch* circles, *Sigfrid oder Christus* ("Sigfrid or Christ", 1910) by Otto Sigfrid Reuter (1876-1945), another early neo-pagan protagonist of the *völkisch* and the German Faith movement. In this work, "the hero of the Nibelungen story, Sigfrid, is celebrated as a 'light' warrior who leads through victory (*Sieg*) to peace (*Frieden*)."²⁵

To grasp the full scale of Hendrich's involvement in the neo-pagan and *völkisch* milieu, one has to return to the ensemble at the Hexentanzplatz and direct the attention toward Ernst Wachler (1871-1945). His role for the *völkisch* movement was more significant than later protagonists of it wanted to acknowledge, due to his partial Jewish roots.²⁶ In 1900, Wachler provided "the prototype of all later 'neopagan' prophecies" in form of his little booklet *Über die Zukunft des deutschen Glaubens* ("On the future of German faith").²⁷ In this racist anti-Romanic, anti-Semitic and anticlerical programmatic booklet, he paves the way for a race-based Blut-und-Boden religion – and turns to fairy tales, folktales, and myth:

The faith natural to our people had been there once [...]. It is not dead, just buried. Could not the soil of which it sprouted be opened again? Let us just try whether we cannot find an access to the world of our fairytales and folktales, to the lost sanctuary of our people.²⁸

While other *völkisch* artists (Fidus, Ludwig Fahrenkrog) also planned to build Germanic Faith temples, Hendrich was the only one who actually succeeded in shaping a neo-pagan site of gathering and worship, together with Ernst Wachler, who had his Germanic amphitheatre built at the very same

²⁵ S. von Schnurbein, *Norse Revival...*, p. 40.

²⁶ U. Puschner, *Völkische Bewegung...*, p. 233.

²⁷ Ibidem, p. 226; see also S. von Schnurbein, *Norse Revival...*, p. 38.

²⁸ E. Wachler, *Über die Zukunft des deutschen Glaubens. Ein philosophischer Versuch*, Freiberg in Sachsen 1930 (1st edition Berlin 1900), p. 11; quotation translated after U. Puschner, *Deutsche Reformbühne und völkische Kultstätte. Ernst Wachler und das Harzer Bergtheater*, in: *Handbuch zur "Völkischen Bewegung"...*, pp. 762-796, here p. 783.

location. The Hexentanzplatz was already a national place of remembrance, as it was allegedly a site of pagan witchcraft rituals and played an important role in Goethe's *Faust* (this drama itself a place of remembrance as it represented both the German classical tradition and, through its author, the national genius).²⁹ The Harzer Bergtheater was the most important place of neo-pagan worship:

Not only was the stage to become an altar, but the location of the theater itself was also turned into a place of worship, in synchronicity with the powers of nature and landscape. The *Harzer Bergtheater* was used for the activities of German Faith organizations such as the *Deutschreligiöse Gemeinschaft* and *Germanische Glaubensgemeinschaft*. At their gatherings, myth-inspired plays by Wachler and the organizations' founder, Ludwig Fahrenkrog, were performed as well.³⁰

HAUNTED HERITAGE

The city of Thale highlights the myths, fairy tales and the Nordic or Germanic sublime connected to the Brocken mountain in its approach to draw tourists to the region. The individual sights at and near the Hexentanzplatz play a major part in this endeavour. Still, when one looks up the official or most prominent tourist homepages, there is little to no information about the cultural context in which the prominent buildings were designed and built. On the Walpurgishalle, the page bodetal.de provides the following information (only in German):

The Walpurgis-Hall on the Hexentanzplatz is a small museum in Old Germanic style that was built in 1901 according to plans by the architect Bernhard Sehring from Berlin. The blockhouse-like building is located at the northern end of the Hexentanzplatz, close to the Harzer Bergtheater. The gable of the Walpurgis-Hall is crowned by the head of one-eyed father of the gods, Wotan, flanked by the ravens Hugin and Munin and the wolves Geri and Frecki. In order to become omniscient, Wotan drank from the well of wisdom. For the drink from this well that was guarded by the giant Ymir [sic!], Wotan had to sacrifice one eye. The name of the building is mirrored also in the interior in a way worth seeing. Five large wall paintings with motives from Goethe's *Faust* and other tales about Walpurgis adorn the walls. The works of art were created by the artist and historic painter Hermann Hendrich, who also had the idea to erect the Walpurgis-Hall. At the entrance area, there is also a sacrificial stone, which was found at the nearby Sachsenwall

²⁹ S. von Schnurbein, *Norse Revival...*, p. 318.

³⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 316f.

[literally “the Saxon’s wall”, but actually the ruins of the pre-historic Homburg – J.E. Schnall] during the work with the hall.³¹

On the even more problematic Wachler and his Harzer Bergtheater, bodetal.de provides at least some hint to the context of its origin (the same text appearing also on other webpages):

The open-air theatre [...] was founded by Dr. Ernst Wachler under the name “Green Scene”, thereby fulfilling his dream of a theatre after a Greek model in the Harz. The plays which Wachler had performed during the first years, had a folkloristic touch and were characterized by a patriotism not comprehensible any more nowadays.

But as is easily seen, nothing points to Wachler’s outspokenly racist, anti-Semitic and neo-pagan ideological background – in the explanation above, it is just the plays that had a “folkloristic” character, and “patriotism” veils the *de facto* nationalistic-*völkisch* and neo-pagan context. And as Hendrich died in a train accident at his second home and place of desire, Szklarska Poręba/Schreiberhau in 1931, his life thus ending prior to the twelve dark years of Nazi rule in Germany, this seems to invite unproblematic uses of his heritage by present-day Germans – the official webpage of the *Nibelungenhalle* chooses not to mention the *völkisch* context of the building. And the recent catalogue covering a larger exhibition of Hendrich’s paintings in 2014-2015 at his place of birth Heringen does not mention the *völkisch* context of neither Hendrich’s art nor of his halls.³²

As such, the cases taken up by this article make a point of more general relevance: Instead of whitewashing the in some instances more, in others clearly less harmless protagonists of the *völkisch* movement and the ambivalent cultural heritage that is left from them, and instead of cultivating a naïve and uninformed experience of the *völkisch* emsembles round the Walpurgishalle and Harzer Bergtheater in Thale and the *Nibelungenhalle* in Königswinter, it would be highly desirable to provide the information necessary for an adequate understanding of their historic background. Often, uncritical information is copied and multiplied by numerous webpages and finds its way also into tourist guides which, as might be supposed, adopt the harmless and de-contextualized interpretations of ambivalent places of remembrance.³³

³¹ <https://www.bodetal.de/poi/walpurgishalle-auf-dem-hexentanzplatz-1/> (accessed 21 December 2019).

³² *Katalog zur Sonder-Ausstellung “Hermann Hendrich anlässlich seines 160. Geburtstages” im Schloss Heringen 29. Oktober 2014-30. April 2015*, ed. K. Moser, Heringen 2017.

³³ Cf. e.g. M. Vieser, *Heimatkunde für Fortgeschrittene: Bodenlose Löcher, Lügenmuseen und andere kuriose Sehenswürdigkeiten*, München 2010, ch. 11: “Und ewig hallt es noch: die Germanen leben hoch! Walpurgishalle und Nibelungenhalle: Erlebnisarchitektur aus der Kaiserzeit”.

Of course, this lack of information is not confined to popular media. In his dissertation on the architect Bernhard Sehring, the author Ralph Berndt bases almost the entire interpretation of the figural program on the outside of the Walpurgishalle on the first booklet on the hall from 1901.³⁴ Berndt copies thirty lines of the booklet with almost no changes and without any marking or reference at all, and apart from replicating typos such as Nimir for Mimir, far worse, he adopts uncritically the ideological tainting and the complete interpretative assessment from the booklet – on the one-eyed Wotan, he thus relates: “But all-seeing he remained, his sun-gaze still shining from one eye.”³⁵ Any mention of the *völkisch* and neo-pagan background is sought in vain.

Once places are charged to the extent demonstrated above, there is no way back to fairytale land. Instead of allowing for an aesthetic experience of place and cultural heritage *combined* with an awareness of their uses through time, their allure and entangling mechanisms of aesthetic effects, the approach “innocence by ignorance” paves the way for new abuses and plays in the hand of nationalism 2.0 in form of identitarian ideology.

ABSTRACT

The present article deals with uses of the past in art and architecture within networks and associations of the *völkisch* movement of the German Empire around 1900. It takes the *völkisch* painter Hermann Hendrich as an example and focuses specifically on halls which he had built for his paintings at Thale, Szklarska Poręba, Königswinter and Burg a.d. Wupper, conceptualized as total art works. The article traces the ideological and aesthetic contexts of these halls which were different in style, but all addressing distant pasts through holistic programs involving architecture, figural decorations, paintings, and the natural surroundings. The article shows how they were meant to function at their sites, deliberately chosen places of remembrance – in the case of the Walpurgishalle as part of an ensemble shaping the most important place of neo-pagan worship in Germany.

³⁴ R. Berndt, *Bernhard Sehring. Ein Privatarchitekt und Theaterbaumeister des Wilhelminischen Zeitalters. Leben und Werk*, Cottbus (Diss.) 1998, p. 193; booklet: P. Kraemer, *Die Walpurgishalle auf dem Hexentanzplatz. Eine Schöpfung Hermann Hendrichs und Bernhard Sehrings. Einige Worte zum Geleit!*, Berlin 1901 [reprinted Thale 2001].

³⁵ R. Berndt, *Bernhard Sehring...*, p. 193.



Fig. 1. Walpurgishalle, Thale, exterior 2018 (© User: Matthias Süßen, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Hexentanzplatz_Thale_msu2017-0633.jpg – accessed: 20 December 2018).



Fig. 2. Walpurgishalle, Thale, interior, 2004 (© Jens Eike Schnell / Karin Stoverock).