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**AN ECOCRITICAL READING OF AN EARLY
MEDIEVAL HEROIC EPIC:
WALTHARIUSLIED/WALTHARIUS**

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Abstract: *Drawing inspiration from recent ecocriticism applied to the study of literature and also of narratives from the pre-modern period, this study examines the extent to which nature mattered critically in the development of an early medieval epic poem in Latin, Walthariuslied. The poet does not voice specifically concerns regarding a potentially negative impact of nature on the protagonist; on the contrary, he demonstrates that the hero's survival is possible only because he knows how to draw from nature's resources and natural settings, and so he defends himself effectively in a cave in the Vosges Mountains. Whereas other vernacular heroic poems at times express deep warnings about the destruction of nature because of people's actions (Beowulf, with a sense of the apocalypse), here we observe the opposite: a close cooperation between the human hero and the natural environment.*

Keywords— *Walthariuslied/Waltharius; Ecocriticism; Early Medieval Latin Epic Poetry; Support from nature; Protection; War and Nature*

INTRODUCTION

Despite efforts by conservative or extremist politicians to deny that the earth is facing a dramatic increase in temperatures and a steady decline of natural resources, especially water, energy, and foodstuffs, the situation currently (2024) does not look good at all. Short of sounding the alarm, if we are not already beyond that, both natural scientists and scholars in the humanities have increasingly raised the scepter of the imminent dangers to our world. There are many effective ways to address this global problem, and we would not have to worry so deeply if not too many individuals holding power in governments

and corporations were completely obtuse to these challenges and objected to any efforts to handle this enormous crisis in a rational, reasonable, and constructive fashion, maybe because of their greed, fear, or ignorance.

Significantly, working toward finding solutions in the short and long term requires that we also gain a fundamental understanding of what the various natural crises throughout time might entail for us today and then acknowledge that human activities have always had a major impact on the natural environment (see, for instance, the contributions to Bauch and Schenk, ed., 2020). Raising awareness about that relationship, whether negative or positive, seems to be the primary task we ought to tackle in the humanities, even if we do not easily come up with pragmatic solutions at present, at least not yet. The more the public discourse is supported by factual details, the more we can hope for a productive paradigm shift in the face of the global crisis. Those details, however, do not have to be all just science-driven because the development of positive sentiments regarding nature as a space we actually depend on and as an entity we ought to respect and hence treat appropriately constitutes the foundation for a significant transformation in people's mindsets and in our culture. Only a collective willingness to address global problems promises to yield actual solutions (Ostrander 2022).

A vast majority of scientists have accepted as a fact that we are all facing highly dangerous changes in our world and that humanity could suffer badly if we do not do something about it (Levin 2023; Shefrin 2023; Kosakyan, Catana, and Biketova, eds., 2022; Tiefenbacher, eds., 2020). The same could be claimed for the young generation today at large, whereas many leading representatives of society tend to reject the notion of global warming and so block necessary strategies to protect our future (Hoggan and Littlemore 2009; Vinós 2022). Agnotology, however, often the result of extreme capitalistic thinking and religious extremism, proves to be tantamount to sticking the head in the sand, making our current conditions even worse (Ove Hansson, 2017; Kourany and Carrier, eds., 2020; Verburgt, eds., 2024).

One small step in the direction of developing further environmental awareness and a sense of human responsibility proves to be the investigation of older, that is, pre-modern notions of nature and hence the natural environment as they impacted human activities (Classen, ed., 2024). The more we realize that pre-modern authors already demonstrated considerable concern for nature and had their protagonists interact with it in a variety of ways, the more we will be able to realize the long history of this specific discourse. Ecocriticism thus promises to strengthen, even from a medieval perspective, post-modern

sensibilities and arguments concerning the environmental crisis and the central importance of nature in human existence.

It would be far from me to undermine the current debate about global warming, for instance, with references to comments by medieval poets about natural dangers, as if what we experience today would be nothing but a simple continuation of past problems. Instead, this paper presents an effort to illuminate how an early medieval Latin poet reflected on nature and attributed to it a critical function for the protagonist's survival. Even behind common rhetorical tropes or standard poetic images of nature, there are human observations, emotions, and rational arguments concerning the natural environment (for a traditional view, however, see Pearsall and Salter 1973, 42, for whom most medieval descriptions of nature represent nothing but model images and not reality).

Obviously, the current climate crisis emerged primarily in the early twentieth century, but writers, artists, philosophers, medical researchers, and others in earlier periods already reflected on the negative or positive impact of humans on nature and voiced considerable concern about the dangers to our survival here on earth. They might not have had a full sense of a dramatic crisis in the modern sense of the word, but they undoubtedly viewed the relationship between human society and nature as most meaningful, relevant, and at times even at risk (Rudd 2007).

Famously, the Middle High German poet Walther von der Vogelweide (fl. ca. 1190–ca. 1220) already reflected on the dramatic changes resulting from ongoing agricultural developments and hence the disappearance of forest in his song of old age, “Owê, war sint verswunden alliu mîniu jâr!” (no. 97, I; or Lachmann 124, 1). The main topic is, of course, his experience of the transformation of everything in his life, and in his old age, he witnesses that the trees have been cut down to make room for plowable fields. Having woken up from his sleep, the poet looks around and realizes that nothing has stayed the way it used to be (I, 5–6). Implied is a *laudatio temporis acti* (praise of the past time), but the poet emphasizes above all his great worries about the social and ethical decline, especially among young people. Those individuals who used to be his friends in their youth have become lazy and old (I, 9), all of which finds its most dramatic expression in the following lines:

bereitet ist daz velt, verhouwen ist der walt.
wan daz daz wazzer fliuzet, als ez wîlent vlôz,
für wâr, ich wâne, mîn ungelücke wurde grôz. (I, 10–12)

[The fields are cultivated, the forest is cut down.
Only the water still flows as it used to do,
indeed, I believe that my misfortune will become great.]

The poet almost wallows in self-pity and bitterness about the radical change in life, reminding his audience of the death hidden behind all physical beauty. He himself hopes for God's grace and rejects the material goods because he feels that his own end is near. However, for our purposes, the few lines about the disappearance of virginal nature that had to make room for people's colonization of their environment deserve to be highlighted since they reflect, even though they might amount to not much more than a trope, a deep sense that nature and people are in conflict with each other or that human society is exploiting nature to an extreme, not leaving behind any living tree (Lazda-Cazers 2007, 216–17; Loleit 2018).

Walther's few remarks do not lend themselves particularly well to an extensive ecocritical analysis, especially because his contemporary colleagues hardly ever voiced any similar concerns. At most, we might hear of the marvel that a protagonist used up an incredible number of lances in his tournament combats, as if cutting down massive numbers of trees for knightly purposes did not constitute a problem. Nevertheless, nature mattered already, at least as the operating stage, as the backdrop to the central events, and as an aid to the individual heroes, unless the latter is depicted as using nature to a full extent for his own purposes, whether he caused harm to it or not.

Wolfram von Eschenbach provided a most vivid example for this aspect in his fragmentary *Titirel* (ca. 1220), where we find the two lovers spending time together in a forest clearing, here described as a virtual *locus amoenus* (Wolfram von Eschenbach 1988). We have also learned, for instance, to appreciate the specific focus on bodies of water as an essential element in the *lais* by Marie de France (ca. 1180–ca. 1200) (Waters, ed., 2018), such as in “Guigemar” and “Eliduc.” Crossing water constitutes, we can certainly claim, an epistemological experience, from life to death and from death to life again (see the contributions to Huber-Rebenich, Rohr, and Stolz, ed., 2017).

Looking backwards in time, we discover the universally popular late antique novel, *Apollonius of Tyre* (originally 2nd or 3rd century), where crossing a body of water—the eastern Mediterranean—constantly creates a significant stage in the narrative development. The anonymous poet does not address nature in

specific terms (such as an agent by its own rights), but he certainly alerted his audience to the great impact of the sea and the storm causing shipwreck or allowing pirates to kidnap the protagonist's daughter, Tarsia (Archibald 1991). In fact, utilizing an ecocritical lens, we can recognize the full extent to which early medieval poets were deeply invested in reflecting on nature and its impact on human beings, and vice versa. Scholars such as Gillian Rudd (2007) have already blazed a path into this literary thicket, focusing mostly on the late Middle Ages, when we face a much larger corpus of relevant texts. However, poets in the early Middle Ages already demonstrated a noticeable concern with the natural environment as it impacted the heroes' lives, even if those elements appear before our eyes only fleetingly.

In *Beowulf*, for instance, the protagonist constantly boasts of his superior strength and power, both on land and in the sea, but in the end, even he has to succumb to his death because, fighting against the dragon all by himself until his young retainer Wiclaf rushes to his help, he has to admit that he had underestimated the power of that monster, the archenemy of humanity. Beowulf challenges nature in many ways, such as when he swims after Grendel's mother and eventually manages to kill her down there in her cave. Hrothgar's men even despair about his destiny when they see blood well up from the depths, but the hero has survived and can thus establish peace and stability in Denmark.

Nevertheless, as Fidel Fajardo-Acosta now argues, "Beowulf goes on to rule the Geats for fifty years, driven by the same pride, greed, and violence that he showed as a young man seeking adventures in Denmark. His violent death at the poisonous fangs of the fifty-foot-long, gold-hoarding dragon, as well as the fire that consumes his body and his treasures, are the poet's unequivocal warnings of the fate that awaits the mighty and the proud, those who live by the sword and worship the idols of gold, contrary to the laws of God and the order of nature" (Fajardo-Acosta, forthcoming; conclusion).

WALTHARIUSLIEDWALTHARIUS – AN UNSUSPECTED LITERARY REFLECTION OF ECOPOETRY

Within the Latin context, however, the epic poem *Walthariuslied*, or abbreviated as *Waltharius* (ca. tenth century, if not earlier), appears to address the same concern, the relationship between humans and their natural environment, from the opposite perspective since the protagonist survives and can return home, though not without having lost his right arm in a battle against his enemies (Ring, ed., 2016). At first sight, the poet does not seem to be particularly interested in nature; instead, the focus rests on the

Hunnish attacks against the various Frankish kingdoms in the west and the kings who do not dare to resist him. Instead, they hand over hostages to Attila, either their own son (the Aquitanian prince Waltharius), a daughter (the Burgundian princess Hildegund), or a proxy (Hagen). We learn a bit about the military and political situation at the Hunnish court, where those young people are raised and become, over time, highly influential on the ruler and his wife. The two young men, Waltharius and Hagen, above all, quickly prove to be superior military leaders and are soon enough indispensable for the Hunnish ruler in all his battles. But when, back home, Gunther, the young son of the Frankish King Gibicho, has grown up and assumed his father's throne, Hagen, his proxy, learns about this political development and escapes from Attila's court. Waltharius, however, the son of the king of Aquitaine, at first stays behind, and so does Hildegund, the daughter of the king of Burgundy, the third of the three hostages. The subsequent events invite us to consider carefully the great significance of nature for the hero's performance, his ethos, and his accomplishments. Granted, the *Walthariuslied* does not engage with a natural crisis, but it focuses on a near-catastrophic situation for the protagonist, who survives, however, because he knows how to resort to natural resources and to use the natural setting to preserve his life even in a most dangerous situation (Millet 2008, 105–22).

Waltharius returns one day from the military front to the Hunnish court, once again having gained a major victory for his king. He is finally ready to follow his friend, Hagen, and he meticulously but quietly instructs his beloved maid, Hildegund, to prepare for their secret departure. He himself ensures that every member of the court becomes completely drunk during the festivities, which makes it possible for them to slip away at night without anyone noticing their disappearance. We are subsequently informed in great detail how the two Germanic people traverse the large landmass, separating them from their home countries, and eventually reach the river Rhine. Waltharius pays a ferryman to take them across the water with some fish that he himself had caught in distant waters. Those fish then betray him to King Gunther, who immediately realizes that a foreigner has come through his country. In fact, both he and Hagen, his liege man, understand that this must be Waltharius, who would certainly carry a large treasure from the Huns with him. The king, revealing his low ethical ideals, quickly decides to track down the foreigner, to rob him of his valuables, and to take his maid away, although Hagen severely warns him against all that, especially because the other man would be too mighty for them all, as he knows from his own experience.

Tragically, which represents the central topic of this entire epic poem, Gunther is not controllable, driven by greed and pride, obtuse to any advice, and convinced that his own might would overcome that of a single warrior. With a troop of his own men, including Hagen, they track down Waltharius, who has, in the meantime, found refuge in a cave somewhere in the Vosges Mountains. In the subsequent encounter, the protagonist manages to kill all those retainers whom Gunther sends toward him one by one, including Hagen's own nephew, Patavrid. Waltharius has no chance to avoid that bitter slaughter because his own life is at stake. Battle after battle, the hero overcomes and kills his opponents who approach him individually because the cave's setting does not allow the entire company to attack the foreigner with any hope of victory.

The three men finally realize that they cannot continue fighting each other since they are all severely wounded. In a rather morbid manner, they laugh about their personal losses, mock each other for having lost crucial body parts, get treated by Hildegund, enjoy some wine, and basically act as friends. The poem concludes with just a few lines about their return home: Hagen and Gunther to Worms, and Waltharius to Aquitaine. The protagonist is warmly received by his people, marries his betrothed, and ascends to the throne, from which he then rules for thirty years (Klopsch 1999; Ziolkowski 2014; Händl 2018; Classen 2023).

This brief plot summary has passed over many crucial details and has especially ignored the significant role of the natural setting at the various stages of the narrative, especially from the time on when Waltharius and Hildegund have escaped from Attila's court. Contrary to some expectations, the Latin poet did not intend to correlate the protagonist's experiences with comments on catastrophic developments in the natural world, which would be anachronistic at any rate. So, at first sight, our analysis of the images of nature does not seem to connect with our current concerns about climate conditions, global warming, famine, and other aspects. Nevertheless, as I will argue subsequently, the highly learned poet, whose identity is not all that clear to us (Ring, ed. and trans., 2016, 8–15), except that he was a member of a monastic community (probably St. Gall, today Switzerland), expressed a profound interest in and concern with nature as the crucial backdrop for the narrative's development, i.e., for the hero's last options and fighting spirit against all odds, which brings about the ultimate triumph and his happy return home.

Despite his extraordinary fighting abilities, Waltharius is in great fear of being captured again, which would probably result in his execution. Hence, he and his fiancée use the cover of the night to get away without being seen, and then hide in a forest as soon as the sun rises. However, even there, they fear being discovered, and Hildegund reacts with great worry to any noise by birds or the trees around them: “she shuddered at every whisper of the windy breeze, scared by the birds or branches as they dashed against each other” (69). The couple avoids all civilized places when they travel at night and pursues untrodden paths through the wilderness, “*devia gressu*” (68, v. 357; “pathless wild,” 69).

Freedom awaits them only once they have fully left behind the Hunnish world, although the poet never describes Attila’s court as barbaric or primitive. On the contrary, he has only positive words for the local villages and agriculture among the Huns. Nevertheless, the two fugitives aim for liberty and reject material prosperity as the price for their enslavement (Classen 2021, 103–10). Both the forests and the darkness of the night contribute to their successful run all the way until they reach the river Rhine, where they finally encounter a severe conflict in which he might have almost found his death. The irony of this epic poem consists of its implicit criticism of the young Frankish ruler Gunther, whom the poet virtually equates with the Hunnish King Attila in ethical terms. But nature comes to Waltharius’s rescue. Let us examine those settings more closely.

As to be expected from a heroic narrative, the poet does not linger too much on the details of the natural environment, but the scant comments reveal, after all, how much the protagonist strategizes to survive in a hostile world, constantly on the guard against possible traitors or spies. The couple travels only by night, while at daytime Waltharius catches birds and fish for their nutrition (75), thus taking from nature whatever he can gain without any people noticing it.

Only when they have reached the Rhine are they in need of human assistance. Paying a ferryman with fish he had caught further east, they cross the river. The ferryman, however, delivers those fish to the royal cook, who prepares them for his lord’s meal. King Gunther immediately realizes the foreign origin of those fish and quickly learns the truth that a foreigner has crossed his country (77). Natural objects thus serve as identifiers in cultural and political terms.

While the king prepares his band of retainers to pursue Waltharius, the latter has reached the Vosges mountains, which the poet describes in impressive details, giving us a clear sense of their wilderness, vastness, ruggedness, and hence free space beyond all human settlements.

It is a huge, broad wood that holds countless haunts of wild beasts and is frequently home to the noise of the hounds and horns of the hunt. There were two mountains close by in a secluded recess, and between these stood a cave that was quite pleasant in spite of its cramped chamber. It was not dug out of the earth but formed by an outcropping of rocky crags. Instead, it was a fitting refuge for bloody bandits. This little retreat produced edible green vegetation (81).

Caves often make an appearance in medieval literature, and each time they are evaluated and characterized quite differently, being a dangerous location where dragons or dwarfs reside (*Beowulf*, the *Nibelungenlied*, the Middle High German *Dietrich* epics, the various *Melusine* narratives) or an elegant retreat for lovers to hide from courtly society (Gottfried von Strassburg's *Tristan*). Under any circumstance, they tend to assume ambiguous meanings and values (cf. Hammer 2018, for a collection of examples of caves in Middle High German literature; however, he does not engage with the *Walthariuslied* and the Middle Latin tradition; for global perspectives, see Weinberg 1986; for a variety of perspectives on caves, see the contributions to Bergsvik and Dowd, ed., 2018).

For Waltharius, this cave proves to be the perfect shelter, a secure site against any potential enemies. As the following remarks the hero utters to Hildegund make clear, that cave is situated at a considerable elevation that makes it possible to see far into the distance and hence to notice hostile troops approaching (83). He desperately needs sleep, and since the cave is so uniquely positioned, there would be enough time for the maid to awaken him without a rush (83). The calmness with which Waltharius prepares himself contrasts poignantly with King Gunther's wild, even crazed rush to track down the foreigner and despoil him of his treasures (85).

When Hagen, whom Gunther had forced to join his troop, realizes the set-up of the cave in which Waltharius holds out, he strongly advises his king to negotiate with this mighty man who might "concede to your honor" (89). Nature is on the protagonist's side, who rejects the king's demand, conveyed to him through one of his retainers, Camalo, to turn over his horse, his treasure, and the maid, but he offers a great gift in return for free passage. The king scoffs at this offer and also mocks Hagen's advice to abstain from the fight, blaming him for his alleged cowardice. Hagen, however, having grown angry, refuses to participate in any fights that might erupt, rides away up to a hill ("collem periit," 638), gets off his horse, and sits down on the ground to observe the events as they develop in front of his eyes (93). The natural scenery is thus divided into two locations: the narrow cave and the distant hill.

Tragically, for Gunther's men, both Waltharius's might and skill as a warrior and the narrow entrance to the cave make it impossible for them to achieve their goals; in fact, Waltharius kills them all one by one, which is presented as fully justified because the retainers tend to demand the gold and the maid in an arrogant fashion and thus have to accept their death blow, all of them being victims of their rashness and lack of consideration, and this in the face of the most powerful warrior of their time.

Hagen is the one who advises Gunther to pursue a different strategy. He himself would not break his vow of friendship to Waltharius, but considering his loyalty to the king, he decides to fight the mighty warrior. However, the confrontation outside of the cave would not work. Instead: "Let us depart and give him space to come out, and then place ourselves in a lookout and pasture our horses in the meadow, until, secure at last, he leaves his close-set stronghold, thinking that we have gone" (133). This is then the case, and both sides in this conflict find themselves in great need of specific natural settings.

Waltharius leaves the cave the next morning, but only to run into the two surviving warriors' ambush. Even though the protagonist fears the impenetrability of the forest with its rough underbrush (137), reducing his fighting abilities, he is forced to get on his way, but not before having placed the heads of the slain retainers in a row and having prayed to the Lord, which highlights his Christian faith and his innocence in the killing of all those men purely in self-defense.

The ambush then follows quickly during the next morning, with Hagen and Gunther racing down a hill to surprise Waltharius and Hildegund, the latter recognizing them first (141). The protagonist then readies himself for battle and sends the maid and the horse carrying the treasure off into a nearby forest ("Et citius pergens luco succede propinquo," 142, v. 1522). But he is first subjected to Gunther's flood of insults, who argues that he had fought an unfair battle at the entrance of his cave: "Behold! Fight, if you will, in an open field and find out if luck can get you an end equal to your beginning" (143).

Waltharius ignores the king, whom he does not regard as a worthy opponent, and instead turns to Hagen, wondering aloud why he is disregarding their old bond of friendship. In response, the latter points out that his opponent had killed his own nephew, which now forces him, Hagen, to take up arms against his former friend. The detailed description of the battle among the three of them does not need to be repeated here, but the outcome sheds light on the role of nature once again, though only fleetingly. Waltharius refers to the thorn bush that hides its thorns behind newly sprouting foliage as a metaphor for Hagen's deceptiveness (151–53), and once all three are badly wounded, having lost a limb or, as in Hagen's case,

an eye and some teeth, the fighting comes to a stop: “they wiped the torrential river of blood off the flowers” (157).

The poem is then rounded off with scoffing remarks exchanged between the two old friends, whereupon they depart from that location in the Vosges Mountains, now in peace. We do no longer encounter any further references to nature, but we can clearly recognize overall how much it had mattered for the development of the heroic narrative.

CONCLUSION

Undoubtedly, there are no comments on any natural catastrophes, and in contrast to the Old English *Beowulf*, the medieval Latin *Waltharius* concludes with a happy outcome despite the bodily mutilations all three men have to suffer, not even thinking of the twelve retainers (125) whom the protagonist had overcome and killed. Waltharius’s heroism shines forth not only because he commands such superior strength and military skills, but also because he knows exceedingly well how to utilize natural settings to protect and defend himself in a rather secure position. The two escapees utilize the various forests to hide away from all people, and since they travel at night, no one ever espies them. They are only betrayed subsequently through the foreign fish with which Waltharius pays the ferryman at the Rhine. But the battle in the Vosges underscores one more time the extent to which heroism by itself is not enough for the protagonist to achieve his goals. The poet drew much inspiration from the cave setting, where the hero manages to overcome all the approaching retainers. Only when he is caught in an ambush set up by Hagen and Gunther does he face a more serious challenge, no longer being able to rely on the walls of the cave. And there he has to fight against two of his fiercest opponents, especially his friend Hagen, in the open, with no rocks, walls, or trees to back him up.

However, the outcome remains positive because none of the three men dies despite their terrible bodily injuries. Resting in the grass after their battle, they are forced to wipe off the blood from the flowers, which allows them to recreate the *locus amoenus* of the mountain meadow, irrespective of the intense pain they all feel from their bad wounds. Throughout the entire epic poem, there are important references to nature settings, mostly supporting the protagonist in his various struggles by either providing hiding places or a secure location to defend himself against Gunther’s retainers. Only when he is forced to leave the cave—he has to continue his journey to reach Aquitaine—does he become exposed to a deadly threat and have to fight with all his might and skills to hold back the king and his ally, or advisor, Hagen.

Hildegund remains a rather passive figure, hiding in the forests with Waltharius during their flight, hiding behind him in the cave during the battles, and hiding in a forest near the open space at the end. By contrast, we could almost go so far as to identify nature as an agent by itself, assisting the protagonist in various contexts, which makes it possible for him to survive numerous life-threatening situations.

Contrary to common expectations, the anonymous poet of the *Walthariuslied*, quite parallel to other contemporary heroic epics (*Beowulf*; “The Wanderer”), paid considerable attention to the natural context within which the protagonist operates. Without resorting deliberately and circumspectly to forests, mountains, the cave, and the river Rhine, this poem would not have developed as successfully as it does. The anonymous poet was obviously quite familiar with the geographical conditions in the regions surrounding the city of Worms and including the Vosges mountains, and he drew from that knowledge with great effect to explain how and why the protagonist manages to escape, why he is then pursued, why he can fight off his opponents, and why he is finally ambushed by Hagen and Gunther. Only there, in the open space of a meadow, does he face superior opponents, although those two men do not defeat him either. Our ecocritical perspective certainly yields valuable insights into the role and function of natural settings in early medieval heroic poetry. This interest grew and expanded throughout the Middle Ages and the early modern age, thus setting the stage for modern-day awareness of the natural environment as a precondition for human existence.

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