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with Laura Harrison

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East Meets West? Heritage, Medievalism, and the *Nibelungenlied* on the Danube¹

Alexandra Sterling-Hellenbrand
Appalachian State University

The monument draws the visitor's eye as the figures seem to rise above the park gardens and walkways, their silhouettes punctuating the natural setting along the banks of the Danube (Figure 1). Individual features become clearer upon closer observation. We see a woman, eyes lowered, gracefully holding her skirts as her headdress flutters in the wind. Three male figures accompany her, following behind. They seem wary, hesitant, holding back as the woman continues forward; one of them has a hand outstretched, perhaps in a gesture of greeting. The man facing her stands with one foot forward as though he has stopped in mid-stride; his placement forms a central axis for the tableau and a focal point for the viewer. Though his left hand grasps the sword at his side, he holds his right forearm across his chest and his head is uncovered: he has not come to fight. The man's features and accoutrements suggest he could hail from a region like the steppes of central Asia. Three figures accompany him as well; like him, they seem unafraid, waiting as they watch the approach of the group opposite them.



Figure 1: The *Nibelungenlied* Monument, Tulln (author's photo)²

¹ This essay is a revised version of a presentation given at the 2018 International Conference on Medievalism (Boundary Crossings) at Brock University in St. Catherines, Ontario; the author thanks the *YWiM* editors and anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments and feedback.

² All photos, unless otherwise noted, are by the author made on a visit to Tulln in June 2018.

Close to the Danube's edge, not far from the central pedestrian zone, the small Austrian city of Tulln (population approx. 15,000) erected this monument in 2005 to celebrate perhaps one of the most (in)famous meetings in German medieval literature from the *Nibelungenlied*: Kriemhild, widow of the slain Siegfried and sister of the Burgundian kings, is met by Etzel (Attila) the king of the Huns, who is going to take her back to his realm as queen. The poem tells us:

There is a place that lies by the Danube in Austria which is called Tulln. There she [Kriemhild] became acquainted with a great number of strange customs which she had never seen before. Plenty of people welcomed her there who afterwards met with sorrow for her sake.³

The Danube and its communities feature prominently in the second part of the *Nibelungenlied*, particularly in the passages that describe Kriemhild's journey from her home in the German city of Worms to join the Huns. Several still-existing towns along the river are mentioned as Kriemhild makes her journey eastward; the poem describes her stops in Passau, Melk, Mautern, Pöchlarn, and Traismauer before she reaches Tulln. She and Etzel will go on to conclude their wedding celebrations in Vienna. The river acquires even greater significance during the second journey the Burgundians make to the Huns. After over a decade among Etzel's people, Kriemhild has invited her relatives to visit. When the Burgundians reach the Danube, they find the river impassable. Hagen comes upon three water nymphs who tell him how to ford the river safely; however, they also reveal that all of those who cross will die. The above passage that first mentions Tulln foreshadows this fate as it contrasts the joy of welcome with the sorrow of events yet to come.

Certainly, the Danube makes its presence felt in the medieval text as a physical border. In modern Tulln, the river still makes its presence felt. Barges and cruise ships attest to the fact that the Danube remains one of the hardest-working waterways in Europe. As the backdrop for the Nibelung monument in Tulln, however, the river also offers multiple (literal and figurative) opportunities for crossings with respect to the *Nibelungenlied*, both the narrative and its reception, particularly in the geographic region we now know as Austria. My own most recent work has dealt with the museal display of medieval German literature in the German city of Worms and the town of Wolframs Eschenbach.⁴ The

³ Verse 1338. Citations from the *Nibelungenlied* are from *Das Nibelungenlied. Mittelhochdeutsch. Neuhochdeutsch. Nach der Handschrift B*, ed. Ursula Schluze and trans. Siegfried Grosse (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2010). For the sake of expediency, I cite here the English translation by Edwards: *The Nibelungenlied. The Lay of the Nibelungs*, trans. Cyril Edwards (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 124.

⁴ Alexandra Sterling-Hellenbrand, *Medieval Literature on Display: Heritage and Culture in Modern Germany* (New York, London: Bloomsbury, 2020).

Nibelung monument in Tulln shows medieval literature on prominent display in Austria as well, in a unique intersection of medievalism and heritage along the Danube. A similarly innovative project, the Styrian literature pathways of the Middle Ages (*steirische Literaturpfade des Mittelalters*), follow literary walks through the landscape of southeastern Austria in the province of Styria; at the most basic level, these displays connect the visitors of today with the literature of the past in a familiar place from a new perspective.⁵ More specifically, in the general context of medieval literature from the German-speaking regions, a focus on Austria offers a unique complement and counterpoint to business as usual. On the one hand, Austria shares medieval German literary culture with its larger neighbor to the north; texts like the *Nibelungenlied* and the poems of Walther von der Vogelweide or Oswald von Wolkenstein belong to a geographic area that transcends today's national boundaries. On the other hand, to state the obvious, the Austrians are not the Germans. The Tulln monument in particular—depicting a text (the *Nibelungenlied*) laden with negative overtones that still reverberate through local and regional history—not only prompts a comparison between Austrian and German use of medievalism in navigating the twentieth-century past. It also claims a different, and distinctly Austrian, approach to the modern afterlives of medieval literature in German.

The Tulln monument inhabits the convergence of several spaces: an imaginative space that offers a threshold between literary past and real present; a creative space that mediates artistic forms, translating medieval verse into modern sculpture; a real space that marks the edge of the city, inviting visitors to enter a beautiful park and recreation area. These spaces combine to create a unique “place of imagination,” a term used by Stijn Reijnders to describe physical (“authentic”) locations that anchor a fictional creation shared in a collective imagination rather than in an experience of history. As the monument seeks to engage visitors of the present by opening a dialogue with a medieval literary past, it calls upon visitors to navigate between what is imagined and what is real; the location guides the negotiation of meaning because it serves as a material reference to a “common imaginary world.”⁶ Placed physically (at the Danube's edge) at a location of importance to a twenty-first-century community (Tulln), the monument invites us to consider a medieval text (the *Nibelungenlied*) given tangible form in sculpture (the 2005 installation by Michail Nogin). Furthermore, as a relatively new contribution to the dialogue

⁵ The project was designed and implemented by a creative team under the direction of Wernfried Hofmeister at the University of Graz; Hofmeister provides an update in his essay “Altdeutsche Texte im Öffentlichen Raum. Projekt- und Forschungsbericht über das Netzwerk ‘Steirische Literaturpfade des Mittelalters,’” *Zeitschrift für deutsches Altertum und deutsche Literatur* 143 (2014): 467-83. Theresa Zifko describes the design background of the project in *Literatur lokalisiert: museologische Überlegungen zur Präsentation von literarischen Texten mit besonderer Bezugnahme auf das Designkonzept des Projekts Steirische Literaturpfade des Mittelalters* (Frankfurt a.M.: Peter Lang, 2013), 57-77. The project's website offers a visual overview: <https://literaturpfade.uni-graz.at/>, accessed 18 December 2019.

⁶ Stijn Reijnders, *Places of the Imagination* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2011), 13-14.

between past and present, the monument invites us to consider the role of literary heritage in the contemporary Austrian landscape.

The monument has three main components, which we could see as intersecting yet distinct perspectives on the *Nibelungenlied* and its message. The most prominent component is the constellation of figures on the stone wall. The figures depict the arrival of Kriemhild's entourage in Tulln, as Kriemhild dismounts and goes to meet Etzel:

Then the proud queen was lifted down from her palfrey. Mighty Etzel waited no longer then. He dismounted from his horse, along with many bold men. They saw him walk joyfully towards Kriemhild. Two mighty princes, so we are told, carried the queen's train, walking alongside her, as King Etzel walked towards her, and there she welcomed the noble prince with a gracious kiss.

She drew back her head-dress. Her well favored complexion shone out of the gold. . . . Close to her there stood the king's brother, Bløedelin. Rüdiger, the powerful margrave, bade her kiss him and King Gibeche. Dietrich was also standing there...⁷

A plaque off to one side of the monument confirms that the figures before us are the ones we expect from the older text: Dietrich, Gibeche, and Etzel's brother (here named Bleda). Rüdiger is there, too. According to the *Nibelungenlied*, he has remained with Kriemhild and her company since he hosted them at his home in Pöchlarn; he is the man depicted with his hand outstretched, asking the queen to give the king and his men a proper welcome.⁸

The second component of the monument is a fountain that integrates the sculpture more fully into the park by adding an opportunity for interaction. Children count the seconds between changes in the sequence, for example, trying to catch droplets as first one side, then the other, then both together spout water toward the center. The cycle then repeats. The water of the fountain, of course, neatly connects with the river visible just on the other side of the monument. The fountain also provides another metaphor for the story: the streams of water that come from opposite directions, mirroring the encounter above between Kriemhild and Etzel, meet and unite to flow into a common pool. Finally, designed to resemble the pages of the book we see just below, the fountain also draws our attention to the monument's third section. The book lies open, text is visible on the left-hand side, a quill lies diagonally point down on the lower part of the right-hand side (Figure 2). The right page is blank. The text reproduces four stanzas from the 22nd adventure of the *Nibelungenlied* that summarize the event enacted above in the popular

⁷ Schulze, *Nibelungenlied*, verses 1346-1352; Edwards, *Lay of the Nibelungs*, 124-5.

⁸ Schulze, *Nibelungenlied*, verse 1345; Edwards, *Lay of the Nibelungs*, 124.

and widely circulated nineteenth-century rhymed translation by Karl Simrock.⁹ While the book and its pages (like its verses) are fixed in time, the fountain moves. The back-and-forth of the water cycle recreates a kind of page-turning alternating movement that the bronze, by contrast, locks into a single moment. The writing motif is reinforced by a stone set off to the side with what appears to be an unfurling piece of parchment; an owl perches atop the stone, where we find an explanatory note about the story, as well as a diagram of the figures on the monument with their names.

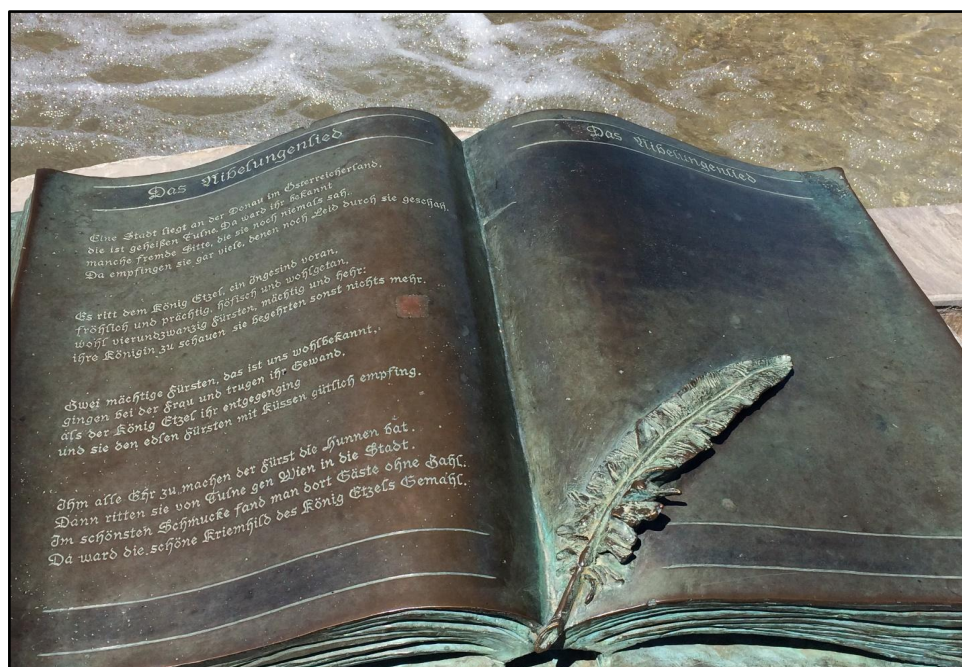


Figure 2: Close-up of monument

Located prominently near the gardens beside the river along the promenade leading to the open air stage, the monument was part of a collaboration between the city of Tulln and sculptor Michail Nogin.¹⁰ Having emigrated to Austria in 1989 from his native Russia, at a time that heralded radical and rapid change in European borders, Nogin moved from east to west himself as he relocated from Moscow to Vienna. In the early 2000s, the city of Tulln commissioned him to make several sculptures representing key figures from the city's history. They have all become part of the Danube park and garden area that stretches along the river parallel to the town. The first, in May 2000, was a statue of Austrian artist Egon Schiele, born in Tulln in 1890. The sculpture stands in front of the

⁹ *Das Nibelungenlied*. Mittelhochdeutsch und übertragen von Karl Simrock (Berlin, Darmstadt: Tempel-Verlag, 1964), 359, 361, 365. Compare Schulze, *Nibelungenlied*, verses 1338, 1339, 1347, and 1358; Edwards, *Lay of the Nibelungs*, 124-5. The monument text slightly adapts Simrock's translation, notably the substitution of "Gäste" (guests) in the last verse for the word "Frauen" (women) in Simrock to make the message perhaps a bit more inclusive.

¹⁰ "Michail Nogin," accessed 12 December 2019, <http://www.nogin.at/index.html>.

entrance to the Schiele Museum, not far from the Nibelung monument. Nogin's second statue from 2001, a much larger and imposing composition, shows Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius on horseback looking out over the river. This commemorates the original founding of Tulln as the Roman fort of Comargena. The Nibelung monument was finished in 2005 and another Danube motif is displayed in the more recent *Donaunixe* from 2011.¹¹ Taken together, all of Nogin's recent compositions for the city make the Danube park area into a kind of open-air-museum where visitors walk through Tulln's history, real or imagined.

With its Nibelung monument, Tulln draws the literary past into the city's lived present. The figures of Etzel and Kriemhild, and the *Nibelungenlied*, seem to dominate Nogin's installation; however, it is the dynamic flow of the water in the fountain that insistently draws the eye of the beholder. Like the current of the nearby Danube, the water remains in motion. Similarly, asserts the monument, the past is both unchanging and changeable, both written and re-writable. Visitors need only take up the quill or the pen. With this challenge to the present, the monument lends a new significance to the place it now marks, investing that place and the town even more resonantly with the narrative on display. I am tempted to see the monument as a unique variation on what Lucy Lippard calls the lure of the local, or a "geographical component of the psychological need to belong somewhere."¹² Tulln's role in the medieval *Nibelungenlied* offers a geographic basis for the city to enfold an over-familiar medieval narrative in the city's twenty-first-century identity. Places, for Keith Basso, facilitate an experience that becomes "reciprocal" as well as "dynamic."¹³ In his book *Wisdom Sits in Places*, Basso focuses on the ways in which, among the western Apache, the landscape holds the stories that tell the people's history. To know and belong to a place is also to identify with its story. In such an environment, place-making is a way of doing history, where the landscape also informs the social fabric of the community. Places inspire self-reflection, causing us to consider who we are now even as we remember also who we were or ponder who we might become. In this way, the stories of places can become a kind of moral compass.

Basso describes a people who have their archive, and who find their moral compass, in the places that surround them. While the leap from the Apache to Austria is a huge one, I would argue that the Nibelung monument in Tulln demonstrates a similar impulse to draw meaning from place—in a culture (modern Europe) that seeks to re-establish lost

¹¹ The *Donaunixe*, or the "Danube nymph," is Nogin's most recent sculpture installed as part of a fountain in the middle of a roundabout in central Tulln. The statue portrays a graceful mermaid perched atop a boulder, playfully inviting a smile from passers-by. See <http://www.nogin.at/sculpture.html>, accessed 12 December 2019.

¹² Lucy R. Lippard, *The Lure of the Local: Senses of Place in a Multicentered Society* (New York: New Press, 1997), 7.

¹³ Keith Basso, *Wisdom Sits in Places. Landscape and Language among the Western Apache* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996), 107.

connections. In fact, Basso stresses the importance of place-making and of constructing what he calls place-worlds. The latter provide not only a means of reviving former times but also of *revising* them.¹⁴ Responding to the lure of the local, the Nibelung monument unites geographic location and literary narrative to imagine a place-world that revises an over-familiar narrative. For Reijnders, the next step in the revision would involve the equation of sites not only with stories but also with “the plot and moral themes of the story concerned.”¹⁵ In the case of Tulln, geography serves as the physical anchor for the story; however, a new aspirational story provides the moral anchor for the cultural landscape in Tulln and arguably in modern Austria. Offering a resolute contrast to the nationalistic associations of the *Nibelungenlied* in German-speaking culture during the last 200 years, the monument seeks to set a different tone, reclaiming but also refashioning the older story.

The juxtaposition of east and west in the Tulln monument drives this refashioning. As we would expect, Kriemhild arrives from the west walking eastward. Etzel faces west, having arrived from the east. Their costumes, like their physical features, highlight the different ethnic groups and cultural traditions from which the sculptor imagines that they come. On an individual level here, as well as on a cultural scale, the meeting of Kriemhild and Etzel is portrayed as the meeting of West and East; as the *Nibelungenlied* takes pains to remind us, it is also a meeting of Christian and pagan, characterized by a remarkable tolerance:

Etzel’s power was so widely known that at all times at his court the boldest of warriors ever heard of were to be found, be it among Christians or heathens—they had all made their way there with him. Those of the Christian faith, and also those of pagan beliefs, were about him at all times, all practicing their different ways of life—that may perhaps never come to pass again. The king’s generosity saw to it that plenty was given to them all.¹⁶

All of the encounters on this particular journey are peaceful and celebratory; religious differences do not seem to matter—at least for a moment. The monument in Tulln enhances the city’s tourist appeal, hoping to draw visitors with the enactment of the scene from the *Nibelungenlied* that took place on that spot. The monument also encourages visitors to play with the memories they have associated with the Nibelung legend over time: from required reading at school, from local history, from music or film, from the political propaganda of two world wars. The monument implies that different memories

¹⁴ Basso, *Wisdom Sits in Places*, 6.

¹⁵ Stijn Reijnders, “Stories that Move: Fiction, Imagination, Tourism,” *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 19, no. 6 (2016): 672–89, 675.

¹⁶ Schulze, *Nibelungenlied*, verses 1333-1335; Edwards, *Lay of the Nibelungs*, 123.

can and should emerge in the twenty-first century from this story based on its physical anchor in this location.¹⁷

In its message of peace and harmony, reinforced by the flame of peace memorial that the city placed near the monument in 2017, Nogin's monument in Tulln communicates a message similar to a slightly older Nibelung monument at Pöchlarn (approximately 100 km to the west). In the *Nibelungenlied*, Pöchlarn stands out from the courts in Worms and in Hungary as a place of peace, where margrave Rüdiger seeks to bring people together and to unite families. He argues for the common good when he presents Kriemhild with his lord Etzel's request for her hand in marriage. He enacts peace in his actions as host both times he performs those actions: first, on the initial journey, when Kriemhild makes her way to meet and wed Etzel; second, on the later journey, when the Burgundians pause for a respite at Pöchlarn on their way to Hungary on the trip from which they know they will not return. Rüdiger and his family exemplify hospitality, loyalty, and honor. As he negotiates the match between Etzel and Kriemhild, Rüdiger also arranges the betrothal of his daughter to Giselher, Kriemhild's youngest brother. When he falls at last in the 37th adventure, his death precipitates the final confrontation and the tragic conclusion of the epic. Erected in 1987, the monument at Pöchlarn is more understated than the one in Tulln, simply showing sixteen mosaic shields with the coats of arms from the cities where the *Nibelungenlied* takes place, arranged from left to right in the order that they appear in the narrative. The monument's simplicity notwithstanding, the city describes it as a contribution to the European concept of peace, insisting on the importance of Rüdiger's legacy.¹⁸ Indeed, in the *Nibelungenlied*, Rüdiger and his world along the Danube offer a stark contrast to the treachery, loss and humiliation that the Rhine represents. Not only do Rüdiger and his wife exemplify courtliness and courtesy. The model hospitality of Lady Gotelint and the generosity of Rüdiger's household also reflect Etzel's magnanimity, the extent of which we see in his welcome of exiled princes like Dietrich of Bern and others who have come to meet his bride.¹⁹ These expressions of welcome in the *Nibelungenlied* echo discordantly in the deadly conflict that later unfolds at Etzel's hall. Kriemhild's greeting to her family becomes a declaration of hostility, the reunion disintegrates into chaos despite the efforts of Etzel and others, and the Burgundians meet the tragic end predicted earlier by the water nymphs in their encounter with Hagen.

¹⁷ Reijnders, "Stories that Move," 687. That is, the monument seeks to redirect the values which we associate with the story.

¹⁸ See "Nibelungendenkmal," accessed 18 December 2019, <https://www.poechlarn.at/Nibelungendenkmal>. Placed on the banks of the Danube along well-traveled water and land routes to Vienna, the monuments of Tulln and Pöchlarn create both heritage sites in each community as well as a site of memory (drawing from historian Pierre Nora).

¹⁹ Schulze, *Nibelungenlied*, verses 1323-1324; Edwards, *The Lay of the Nibelungs*, 122.

Just as the Burgundians and the Huns meet both in peace and in war in the *Nibelungenlied*, so too have cultures embraced and clashed in their encounters along the Danube as the river winds its way from southwestern Germany to the Black Sea. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the Danube captured the western Romantic imagination as a symbol of Europe's ancient greatness. In his poem "The Ister" ("Der Ister"), referring to the Danube by its ancient Greek name, Friedrich Hölderlin speaks of the "distantly gleaming" river that "invited" Hercules to seek its cooling waters and become its guest.²⁰ William Wordsworth describes a wandering stream that "with infant glee / Slips from his prison walls" to eventually meet mythology, reaching that vast "gloomy sea" where "rough winds forgot their jars / To waft the heroic progeny of Greece."²¹ From humble beginnings, the Romantic river matured as it moved eastward, a conduit between the west and its origins in mythological greatness. Later, the Danube became a symbol of rapidly industrializing Europe. Writing in 1936, Hungarian poet Attila Jozsef imagines that every wave resembles "a man's muscles when hard at his toil, / hammering, digging, leaning on the spade." Yet the waves hold the promise of peace after conflict, too, where "past, present and future / Are all-embracing in a soft caress."²² The river inspires contrast: the child-like spring that becomes the mature river, waves that hold memories of conflict beside the hope for peace, the eastern working-class lower Danube that remains in the shadow of the imperial west. Andrew Beattie, in his introduction to *The Danube: A Cultural History*, sees the river's role changing in the twenty-first century. Whereas the river previously demarcated "Europe's fracture lines—between Ottoman and Habsburg empires, between communist and democratic Europe, and latterly between warring republics of the former Yugoslavia"—it now symbolizes "a newly resurgent, united and dynamic continent."²³ Beattie thus sees the Danube as a potential unifying force in Europe, mediating encounters between the west and the east.

The Tulln monument invokes this role as mediator. The city's tourist information enthusiastically promotes the monument as "East meets West" ("Morgenland trifft Abendland"), highlighting the cultural encounter in the union of a German queen and the king of the Huns.²⁴ That union resonates through a monument made in a time when "east"

²⁰ Friederich Hölderlin, *Poems and Fragments*, trans. Michael Hamburger, 4th bilingual edition (London: Anvil Press Poetry, 2004), 580-5.

²¹ William Wordsworth, "Black Forest, The Source of the Danube," *Memorials of a Tour on the Continent*. (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, and Brown, 1822), 13. Available through *Nineteenth Century Collections Online*, accessed 12 December 2019, <http://tinyurl.gale.com.proxy006.nclive.org/tinyurl/CWAJn0>.

²² Attila Jozsef, "By the Danube (1936)," *Attila Jozsef Poems.*, ed. Thomas Kabdebo., trans. Michael Beevor, Michael Hamburger, Thomas Kabdebo, John Szekely, Vernon Watkins (London: Danubia Book Co, 1966), 28-9, accessed 18 December 2019, <https://www.mathstat.dal.ca/~lukacs/ja/poems2/jozsef-eng.htm>.

²³ Andrew Beattie, *The Danube: A Cultural History* (Landscapes of the Imagination, 2010), xix.

²⁴ See "Geschichtstrchtig: Die Nibelungen," accessed 18 December 2019, <http://erleben.tulln.at/kunst/sehenswuerdigkeiten/nibelungendenkmal>.

and “west” were renegotiating borders (national, political, economic) in Europe after the turbulent 1990s.²⁵ Austria found itself again at a unique geographical and cultural boundary in the German-speaking world. At such times, like Tulln, communities in the present may exploit the temporal elasticity of medievalism²⁶ to seek—and even create—more meaningful dialogue with the past. In this sense, in the Nibelung monument, the historical authenticity of geography and place meets the invented authenticity of a medieval epic. This encounter with the past (real and imagined) in the present breathes new life not only into Tulln but into the *Nibelungenlied*, itself a fraught *Erinnerungsort* for German cultures.²⁷ As such, the Tulln monument shows us how the *Nibelungenlied* has become both a site of memory and a place of imagination.

²⁵ The Styrian literature pathways and the Nibelung monuments (Pöchlarn and Tulln) offer a uniquely Austrian contribution to the emerging “memorylands” of Europe where “land- and city-scapes have filled up with the products of collective memory work” that have only increased since 1989. See Sharon Macdonald, *Memorylands: Heritage and Identity in Europe Today* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 1.

²⁶ Stephanie Trigg, “Medievalism and Theories of Temporality,” *The Cambridge Companion to Medievalism*, ed. Louise D’Arcens (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 196-210, 196.

²⁷ Peter Wapnewski describes the *Nibelungenlied* as a site of memory for German cultures, seeking to recover the depth of a work that has been reduced to clichés, a work often cited but seldom read, co-opted as a model for misguided loyalty. See “Das Nibelungenlied,” *Deutsche Erinnerungsorte*, ed. Etienne François and Hagen Schulze, vol. 1 (Munich: C.H. Beck, 2009), 159-70.