Mittelalterphilologien heute

Eine Standortbestimmung

Band 1: Die germanischen Philologien

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Bibliografische Information der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek

Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der Deutschen Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind im Internet über http://dnb.d-nb.de abrufbar.

Gedruckt auf säurefreiem, alterungsbeständigem Papier
Umschlag: skh-softics / coverart
Umschlagabbildung: © Alessandra Molinari
Bindung: docupoint GmbH, Magdeburg

Printed in Germany
ISBN 978-3-8260-5685-7
www.koenigshausen-neumann.de
www.libri.de
www.buchhandel.de
www.buchkatalog.de

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Germanic philology as a research and a teaching subject in Italy: Past, present, and ... what future?

I think it useful to start this presentation with a piece of basic historical information. Germanic philology – *filologia germanica* in Italian – was officially recognized as a teaching subject and organically introduced in Italian universities only in 1935,[1] even though the beginning of Italian studies in Germanic philology, in a broad sense, goes back to a much earlier date (indicatively, to the last two decades of the 19th century).[2] From the very beginning, it was an obligatory subject for the degree in Foreign Languages and Literatures when one or more of the languages chosen by the student as a main subject of study belonged to the Germanic family.[3] However, permanent chairs of Germanic philology were instituted only much later (1948);[4] in the meantime, its teaching was mainly entrusted to scholars of comparative, i.e. Indo-European, linguistics (as was the case, for example, with Giacomo Devoto in the University of Florence and Vittore Pisani in the University of Milan) or, occasionally, to specialists in German language and literature (as Ladislao Mittner in the University of Rome and later in the University of Venice).[5] Today Germanic philology is present in the degree programmes in foreign languages (variously named) of almost every Italian university. However, it is not always taught by tenured teachers and its place and weight in curricula can vary considerably from one university to another.

That having been said, I would like to stress that the aim of this paper is not to sketch a historical overview of the discipline 'Germanic philology' in

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[1] Cf. Tagliavini 183; Scardigli 1966, 15. This happened in the framework of a general reform of the Italian university teaching system, the so-called "Legge De Vecchi", after the name of Cesare M. De Vecchi, a minister of 'National Education' during the Fascist period.

[2] At the same time the teaching of Romance philology was re-established: actually, this subject already existed, yet with the name "Storia comparata delle (lingue e) letterature neolatine" ('Comparative history of the Neo-Latin (languages and) literatures'). Surprisingly enough, the teaching of Slavic philology had been established with this very name as early as in 1925 (Tagliavini 203).

[3] Tagliavini 209.

[4] The first two permanent-chair holders were Carlo Grünanger and Sergio Lupi, in Milan and Naples respectively (both of them, however, moved later to the teaching of German Language and Literature). They were followed in 1961 by Carlo Alberto Mastrelli (Pisa, then Florence) and in 1964 by Marco Scovazzi (Milan) and Piergiuseppe Scardigli (Bari, then Florence, when Mastrelli moved to the chair of Comparative Linguistics in the same university). See Tagliavini 214–215.

[5] On the historical connections and academic relationships between the teaching of Germanic philology and those of Comparative linguistics and German language and literature in Italy, see Tagliavini 210-211 and Scardigli 1972, 88.

Italy,[6] nor to define its status as compared to other neighbouring fields of study within the Italian university system. Nor is it to bring forward arguments to legitimate its presence in the curricula of certain university programmes – as, typically, in the degree programmes in Foreign Languages and Literatures – because, as it will clearly appear further on, I not only take for granted that it is in its right place there, but also that it is a necessary subject.[7] Rather, my chief purpose here is to bring into focus and, especially, to make as understandable as possible to the foreign audience the contents and directions that have so far characterized research in Germanic philology in this country and the role assigned to this branch of learning as a teaching subject in degree programmes and in the applicative regulations of university curricula within the humanistic area. Some considerations will follow on what, in my opinion, should be the most appropriate and effective approach to the teaching of Germanic philology in Italy in the perspective of a comprehensive and consistent professional training of university students specializing in foreign languages, cultures and literatures (for whatever actual application).

I am perfectly aware that this presentation will appear to some readers – especially among the Italian scholars of Germanic philology – quite subjective, sometimes superficial, and above all rather incomplete. On the other hand, it is impossible to examine in depth, even less to exhaust, such a vast theme as the one I have proposed on this occasion in the average space of a conference paper. As for subjectivity, this is unescapable when one has to do with a field of studies linguistically, historically and culturally as complex and multi-faceted as this. Moreover, considering that this audience is largely, perhaps mostly, made up of non-Italian scholars, it becomes necessary to make explicit some essential information concerning our discipline which would be taken for granted in the presence of an all-Italian audience.

Thus, before getting to the core of the matter, some words must be spent to explain the contents and the extension commonly attributed, in Italy, to *filologia germanica* both as a research and a teaching subject. To be quite honest, this is not an easy task. The ideal thing would be to report, compare and comment on some of the many statements that, more or less officially and solemnly, have been expressed in this regard by some authoritative Italian scholars of Germanic philology since its coming into existence as an 'autonomous' discipline; but this, too, is impossible due to space limitations.[8] For the

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[6] For that purpose there are excellent and well-documented treatments, some of which are mentioned in the present paper.

[7] For the sake of simplicity, I omit to treat here the role of Germanic philology – or, more exactly, Germanic linguistics – in the degree programmes in historical and comparative linguistics, because this is a rather uncommon practical occurrence.

[8] In this connection it should be mentioned that in 1970 – while a first radical reform of the Italian university system was under way – a number of prominent scholars variously concerned with Germanic philology and engaged in its study expressed and confronted their own views and proposals about the most convenient ways to approach this discipline in a collection of essays published in a volume of the journal *Studi Germanici* (see bibliographical

purpose of the present discussion, I think this task can be fulfilled in a practical and, I believe, legitimate way, namely by quoting the formal definition[9] of 'Germanic philology' – or, more exactly, 'Germanic philology and linguistics' – proposed and unanimously approved by 'the *Associazione Italiana di Filologia Germanica* ('Italian Society for Germanic Philology') some years ago[10] – prior to the application of the latest Italian university system reform[11] – in an official document submitted to the Ministry of Education, University and Research. This formulation summarizes in a nutshell an idea of the discipline widely shared by the scientific community of the Italian Germanic philologists and can virtually be considered the result of a reflection on the essence of Germanic philology filtered through the elaboration of three generations of scholars. The definition reads as follows:

> *Filologia e Linguistica Germanica*: Comprende gli studi sulle lingue, le culture e le letterature germaniche, con speciale riguardo al periodo antico e medievale, valutate principalmente con l'impiego di metodologie filologiche e linguistiche, ivi compresa l'analisi informatica di testi e corpora, e con particolare attenzione agli aspetti comparatistici e di interferenza con le aree linguistiche non germaniche.
> ('*Germanic Philology and Linguistics* concerns the study of Germanic languages, cultures and literatures, with special reference to the ancient and medieval period, principally conducted through the application of philological and linguistic methodologies – including computer analysis of texts and corpora – and with particular attention to comparative matters and to the interference with non-Germanic linguistic areas.')[12]

As we can see, the meaning assigned to the label 'Germanic philology' in the Italian academic context is the largest and most flexible one can imagine. In fact, it is a kind of all-embracing cover including several fields of study and linguistic areas, which is a consequence of the fact that the Italian university system does not consider the presence of more specific (e.g. English, German, etc.) philologies. This is not a problem in itself; on the contrary, it is a guarantee of independence of the philological branch from the spheres of the various modern Germanic languages and literatures. Moreover, the study of Germanic philology as a unitary discipline, not disjointed into philologies relating to individual Germanic languages, not only allows for a global perspective over the

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references below). On the other hand, it is true that in the over forty years that have passed since then, the historical, social and cultural context in which not only Germanic philology but all humanistic disciplines are cultivated has undergone significant changes, so that part of those positions have progressively been revised and/or adapted to new situations and requirements.

[9] The so-called *declaratoria*, in the Italian bureaucratic language.

[10] Precisely, on 9 June 2005.

[11] Law no. 240 of 30 December 2010, followed by Ministerial Decree (*Decreto Ministeriale*) no. 336 of 29 July 2011, which established the new grouping criteria for the 'scientific and educational sectors' (*settori scientifico-disciplinari*); see also notes 24 and 25 below.

[12] All English translations of Italian texts contained in this article are mine.

common and original traits to which all Germanic languages and cultures trace back, but also prevents from falling into the mistake – sometimes observable in research practice in some foreign countries – of considering peculiar to a single linguistic and cultural area what in fact is also shared by other areas.[13] Nonetheless, owing to the vastness and the complexity of the historical, linguistic and cultural spectrum of the Germanic area, it usually happens that every Italian scholar of Germanic philology actually specializes and operates in a specific linguistic or thematic area, with only rare and occasional forays into the other areas.[14]

Some decades ago, there was a strongly limitative historical and cultural prejudice that there should be no Germanic philology outside of a strictly comparative and reconstructive context (which obliged one to study only common and general issues, or else phenomena relating to single areas that in some way were traceable to the primitive Germanic unity). Once this bias disappeared, the scope of Germanic philology in Italy began to encompass, and still encompasses today, a great part of the linguistic and cultural history of those national realities which have their starting point in the common Germanic linguistic patrimony, but which have gradually differentiated from it and from each other, each following a path of its own.[15] This is as much as saying that Germanic philology, besides continuing its traditional task of investigating the earliest Germanic documentation, which in virtue of its age can be considered the reflection of the primitive Germanic unity, is in fact the sum of several philologies of narrower scope, each linked to a 'national' linguistic and cultural-historical area.

Among the research fields that were favoured in the past by Italian scholars of Germanic philology, the study of the Germanic element in Medieval Latin and Italian vocabulary has gradually lost much of its weight, except within the study of place names and personal names, which still offers matter for lively discussion.[16] Likewise, after the collection and systematic organization of the

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[13] Cf. Scardigli 1966, 10: "[...] sentire distinto ciò che invece è comune, individualizzare e restare ai margini o in superficie di fenomeni che investono una intera civiltà e non una singola manifestazione di essa." ("[...] to regard as distinct what, on the contrary, is common; to particularize, because of a marginal or superficial perspective, phenomena which pertain to an entire civilization and not to a single manifestation of it.").

[14] Cf. Scardigli 2002, 11 (= Scardigli [1]1983, 39).

[15] See Scardigli 2002, 11 (= Scardigli [1]1983, 39). Cf. also Maria Vittoria Molinari's definition of Germanic philology in Molinari 1: "[...] la scienza che studia ed interpreta le testimonianze scritte di quelle civiltà che hanno avuto comuni origini nel mondo germanico antico e che tali origini riflettono nella loro successiva evoluzione." ("[...] the science that studies and interprets the written testimonies of those civilizations that have had common origins in the ancient Germanic world and that reflect such origins in their subsequent evolution.").

[16] See e.g., most recently, Morlicchio 2006 with reference to Germanic etyma in the *Lessico Etimologico Italiano*.

lexical data was concluded by the GRILAVI,[17] the study of the dialects of the German speaking enclaves in Italian territory also seems destined to be exhausted in a short time: obviously, such a study is closely dependent on the survival of these dialects, which are nowadays more and more bound to extinction, despite the various cultural initiatives taken by local authorities and by groups of 'volunteers' aimed at the preservation of these linguistic vestiges.[18]

We can say that approximately between 1970 and 1990 scientific work of Italian scholars of Germanic philology mostly concerned the Old English, or Anglo-Saxon, area. This was primarily due to the fact that the 'second generation' of Italian Germanic philologists, who no longer came from the ranks of comparative linguistics, but had studied modern languages and literatures, was for the most part formed by specialists in English and therefore by scholars especially interested in the Anglo-Saxon sphere. Specialists in German philology followed at some distance, then experts in Gothic and in the Latin-Germanic relationships (who were the most bound to tradition). Almost absent were specialists in Nordic philology, who were just growing up in those years and would become more and more numerous in the following decades, that is to say from 1990 onwards, in parallel with the increasing number of university chairs of Scandinavian languages and literatures.

I now move on to some general remarks about the contents of *current* scientific research by Italian Germanic philologists.

It is my impression that the current balance of research in Germanic philology in Italy is a little bit too focused on the study of textual *contents* rather than of textual *forms* and too prone to consider single aspects of the investigated texts rather than the plurality of expressions and testimonies which develop in the transmission of those same texts across time. Consequently, the most favoured areas of investigation are, alternatively, the historical, the aesthetical, the psychological, the semiological, the philosophical, or the religious ones – depending on the text(s) under examination – rather than, for example, the text-critical, the codicological and the linguistic ones. In particular, linguistic aspects have been largely, and in my opinion culpably, neglected in the last two-three decades, and today one almost has the impression that linguistics is about to disappear from the scene of the Italian studies in Germanic philology, which tend to converge more and more towards the sphere of *allgemeine Kulturwissenschaft*. Such a tendency also inevitably affects the teaching of this discipline, and this is perhaps the greatest problem – according to what, in my opinion, should be the chief educational aim of Germanic philology in Italian universities (I will say more about that below). It is not surprising,

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[17] *Gruppo di Ricerca sulle Isole Linguistiche Alemanniche del Versante Italiano* ('Group of Research on the Alemannic Language Islands of the Italian Versant [of the Alps]'), established in 1972 at the University of Florence under the direction of Piergiuseppe Scardigli.

[18] For an essential overview of the studies on the Walser dialects in Italy, see Fazzini 2006 and the bibliographical appendix in Fazzini 2011, 101–104.

therefore, that the type of approach just described is especially popular among young scholars, who have often matured with an insufficient training in the linguistic and text-critical analysis of texts and therefore neglect or ignore altogether these fundamental aspects in their research work.

Of course, it is not my intention to belittle, even less to disavow, the importance of an aesthetic-semiological and/or socio-cultural approach to medieval Germanic texts, many of which are undoubtedly as worthy as the most famous and prized 'classical' texts. I merely want to stress the fact that this is not, in my opinion, the principal aim of a discipline having its home in a tradition of studies which, since antiquity, has named itself 'philology' and which is to be chiefly understood as *the search for authenticity and originality of the transmitted text*, in a perspective which firmly and permanently unites formal (i.e. linguistic, in a broad sense) and substantial (i.e. culture-historical, in an equally broad sense) aspects. Favouring too much and too often one or the other aspect means to trespass upon the territory of other sciences – and, from the educational standpoint, of other teachings – such as linguistics or literary history and criticism. If such a behaviour is admissible in regard to the freedom of scientific research, which can have no boundaries whatsoever, when it exceeds certain limits it contravenes the statutory rules that each discipline has historically given to itself in order to define and to consolidate its own competences and, at the same time, to act with respect towards other disciplines.

Closely associated with the limited attention given to linguistic studies is the shortage of specific teachings in the history of individual Germanic languages, a lacuna that has been going on for decades.[19] Although there is now a good number of chairs of 'English Language and Translation', 'German Language and Translation' and so on, these teachings deal mostly with aspects of synchronic linguistics, sociolinguistics, and pragmalinguistics, neglecting as a rule the diachronic perspective. Also when language history is taken into consideration, it is most often limited to the modern and contemporary period. Therefore, Germanic philology has also the task to take care of the history of the Germanic languages prior to the modern period, including the history of English, although, as we will later see, in the current Italian university system this language is not included in the same group of disciplines as the other Germanic languages and Germanic philology.

The university – the Italian university – should aim to offer to the graduate in Foreign Languages and Literatures, to the future expert in 'linguistic and cultural mediation', an all-round professional background. In order to be really complete and reliable, that background should encompass both the synchronic and the diachronic perspectives – preferably within a comparative context – with regard to both present and past. In such a framework, the main task of philology – Germanic philology in our case – is to provide the student with

[19] Cf. Santoli 37–38.

the means to acquire a historical dimension, an 'in-depth vision' of the modern languages, literatures and cultures he/she is studying.[20] In this connection, I would like to cite a statement by Piergiuseppe Scardigli, contained in his article *Problemi e speranze della filologia germanica* ('Problems and hopes of Germanic philology'), published in the collective volume on Germanic philology in Italy previously mentioned:[21] "[...] bisogna partire dai dati attuali per risalire a quelli sempre più remoti, sfatando il mito per cui la filologia si occupa solo di anticaglie." ('we should start from the data of the present to go back in time to the more and more remote data, dispelling the myth that philology is only concerned with old junk').[22] The reflection on the knowledge of modern languages and on their current use, on the culture and the institutions of the peoples who speak them and on their literary heritage, cannot be disjoined from a *historical consciousness*, which enables us to see in language development the connections with social, political, and cultural history.[23] Now, which discipline, which teaching subject, if not philology, can

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[20] Cf. Ferrari 2002 and 2011, passim.

[21] Note 8 above.

[22] Scardigli 1970, 91.

[23] I borrow this concept, adapting it to the concern of the present discussion, from the Ministerial Decree of 9 February 1979. In this document, which contains teaching guidelines for the Italian secondary schools, the relevant remarks are applied to the teaching of the Italian language. The text of the decree is available on the web site *Educazione & Scuola* (see bibliographical references below). Moreover, I find it useful to quote here *in extenso* some significant passages contained in the two notes by Fulvio Ferrari mentioned in note 20 above. Ferrari 2002: "Questa disciplina [...] da molti anni svolge [...] un ruolo assai specifico, e insostituibile, nella didattica dei corsi di laurea in Lingue e letterature straniere: quello di fornire allo studente di lingua e letteratura inglese o tedesca (e, dove tali discipline sono attivate, di lingue e letterature scandinave o nederlandese) una dimensione storica al suo apprendimento, la consapevolezza che la cultura che sta studiando affonda le sue radici in un passato – linguistico, letterario, culturale – [...] senza la cui conoscenza la comprensione del presente non può che risultare mutila e banalizzata." ('This discipline [...] has played for many years a very specific and irreplaceable educational role in the degree programmes in Foreign Languages and Literatures, which consists in providing the student of English or German Language and Literature (as well as, where they are available, of Scandinavian or Netherlandic Languages and Literatures) with a historical dimension for his learning, with the awareness that the culture he is studying has its roots in a [...] past – linguistic, literary, cultural – without whose knowledge the understanding of the present can only be defective and trivialized.'). Ferrari 2011: "Quando si usa l'etichetta disciplinare 'Filologia germanica' si fa riferimento a una serie di competenze e aree di interesse diverse, capaci nel loro insieme di fornire uno specifico approccio metodologico [...]. In estrema sintesi: si suppone che un corso di filologia germanica introduca lo studente allo studio dei documenti scritti del medioevo germanico, fornendogli gli strumenti metodologici necessari per ricostruirne i contesti linguistici e culturali, ma nel farlo gli permette anche di vedere le sue lingue di studio in una prospettiva storica e, al contempo, gli fornisce almeno le informazioni di base sul periodo letterario medievale." ('When using the disciplinary label "Germanic philology", one refers to a series of different competences and areas of interest, which, taken together, are capable of providing a specific methodological approach [...]. To put it in basic terms: it is assumed that a course in Germanic philology introduces the

contribute, together with language history, to create such a historical linguistic consciousness?

In Italy, Germanic philology is not only important for the study of the modern Germanic languages and literatures. Although Italy is not (apart from some very limited areas) a Germanic-speaking country like Germany, the Netherlands, the Scandinavian countries, and the greatest part of the United Kingdom, its history – especially those thousand years we conventionally call the Middle Ages – is characterized by frequent contacts and close relationships with Germanic peoples, relationships which in many cases became permanent (with the creation of Romano-Germanic states), and is therefore imbued with 'Germanicism', both with regard to language and to political and cultural institutions. However, the Germanic element is so well blended and harmonized with the Latin and the Romance element as to make itself indistinguishable. Who could tell at first glance that Italian words of common use like *guardare* 'to watch', *schiena* 'back' (part of the body), *ricco* 'rich', and many others, are of Germanic origin? And that terms like *marca* 'march' (a land bordering two countries), *faida* 'feud, vendetta', *borgo* 'small village', and *araldo* 'herald', trace back to concepts, institutions, and customs typical of the old Germanic world? Only through the study of the linguistic and cultural relationships between Latin (then Romance) and Germanic peoples does it become possible to gain knowledge and awareness of these correlations.

After wandering up and down in the past and the present of Germanic philology in Italy, I am now expected to say – or, better, imagine – something about its future. There is a popular saying in Italy: "Il futuro è nelle mani di Dio" ('The future is in the hands of God'). This is even too obvious – no matter if you are a believer or not. Yet, as far as man – especially the one belonging to the species *homo philologicus Germanicus* – can reasonably envisage and expect, the future of Germanic philology in this country (I am very sorry to say, but it's just what I honestly think) has very limited chances of being a bright one.

A couple of years ago, in the context of the latest reform of Italian universities,[24] a sweeping rearrangement of the 'scientific and educational sectors' was enacted by ministerial authorities.[25] Subsequent to this revision, Germanic philology was placed – among other things, against the indications of the scientific community of Germanic philologists, who had formally requested a

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student to the study of the written documents of the Germanic Middle Ages by providing him with the methodological tools needed to reconstruct their linguistic and cultural contexts. At the same time it enables him to see the modern languages he is studying in a historical perspective and provides him with at least basic information on the literature of the medieval period.').

[24] Law no. 240 of 30 December 2010, commonly known as "Legge Gelmini", after the name of the minister (Mariastella Gelmini) who proposed and signed it; cf. note 11 above.

[25] Ministerial Decree no. 336 of 29 July 2011; cf. note 11 above.

different placing – in the same 'competition sector' (*settore concorsuale*)[26] as German, Dutch, and Scandinavian languages and literatures.[27] Therefore, if on the one hand the decision of the Ministry formalized what has always been a 'natural' partnership between Germanic philology and certain modern Germanic languages and literatures on the scientific and educational plane, on the other hand the exclusion of English from this group has caused a huge void and a strong unbalance from the standpoint of Germanic philology. There is no need to go any deeper into this thorny matter, whose distortions are evident to all, and I leave it to your intelligence to imagine what the consequences of this improvident decision can be, in the long run, in terms of both teaching and scientific research.

I think I should stop the flux of my considerations here. Of course, I am fully aware of the fact that I am far from having scrutinized, or even only touched upon, all relevant aspects of the topic under discussion. Many issues, even some crucial ones, have been deliberately left out. In fact, I prefer to leave space for careful reflection by the reader rather than to add further details or introduce further, yet perhaps not central, aspects of the question.

Extending for a moment the glance over the boundary of the proper theme of this paper, I would just like to observe that, in a time in which the sole aspect of culture and scientific research considered by public opinion and politics (as well as, unbelievably, by some segments of the academic world) is often its practical application and the amount of wealth – the so-called 'return' in economic terms – which a certain enterprise, or, to use a fashionable term, a certain 'product' (a book, a conference, an exhibition), is able to produce, it is quite difficult to hope or even to imagine that branches of knowledge and of learning like Germanic philology (and philology in general) will gain strength and expand in the near future.[28] This is all the more difficult because of the highly critical situation of the global economic level at present, which in Italy has brought about an increasingly heavy curtailment of funds for university, research, and culture in general; and it would be a positive thing if we only managed to stop the gradual and dangerous decay of the humanities.

But I want to conclude with a note of hope and confidence (I intentionally avoid the word 'optimism', because in the present state of affairs it sounds to me like a synonym of naivety): it is our duty not only to hope, but also to wish and to fight for a general awareness capable of giving back to the

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[26] A group of related disciplines for the purposes of scientific qualification (*abilitazione scientifica*) and recruitment of university teachers.

[27] The request of the Germanic philologists (made through the *Associazione Italiana di Filologia Germanica*) to have their discipline associated in a common group with other medieval philologies, particularly with Medieval Latin and Romance philology, was rejected by the Ministry without any statement of reasons.

[28] See in this regard the apt remarks of Ferrari (2011), who, on the other hand, underlines the "need for humanistic culture" expressed by large sections of the population and indicates the most appropriate ways to satisfy it.

humanistic sciences, to the *Geistes- und Kulturwissenschaften*, – of which philology is one of the oldest and noblest branches – the full dignity and importance they have always had in the best times of history and civilization.

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