

Elves in History

*Spoiler warning: If you are a child, please ask your parents' permission before reading this.
If you are an adult, or a child at heart, please buckle up and enjoy.*

Most legends have at least a kernel of truth.
Most folklore traces to some historical reality.
Elven origins are no different.

Centuries before J.R.R. Tolkien, generations before movies, and ages before computer games, European archives attested to the existence of powerful elves, who walked the forests and sailed the seas of northern Europe. They were claimed to be ancestors of some of the peoples of Europe. Hundreds of English, Dutch, German, and Scandinavian peoples in the Middle Ages were named in memory of their elven heritage. The well-known English king, Alfred the Great is just one example.¹

Alfred ruled in southern England in the latter half of the 800's AD. His reign was seriously threatened by Viking invasions, so much so that at one juncture, he was driven into the marshes for some time. From there, he slowly rebuilt his forces and his confidence, and subsequently emerged to reestablish a foothold in southern England, reaching a detente with the Vikings that resulted in dividing England in half – the southern half ruled by English kings, and the northern half, or Danelaw,² ruled by Viking kings. (Over time, that division served as the means for the eventual unification of England.)

In this situation, Alfred clearly lived up to his name. For Alfred means “elf (or elven) counsel”. And as we will soon see, elves had a long-standing tradition in Europe of retreating from their attackers, and disappearing into the woods or the marshes. Thus Alfred lived up to his name, and to the heritage of his forefathers.

In modern times, a number of explanations have been forwarded in the attempt to account for elven legends, ranging from sheer superstition to extra-terrestrial visits. However, after surveying historical records from various regions of Europe, this author has come to the conclusion that although elves did walk the earth, they did so as mere mortals. Over the years, for a number of reasons, they just happen to have accumulated quite a reputation.

This account attempts to explore their origins, and how they received their name. It also offers an explanation for their evolving reputation, and provides documentation of what became of them and some of their descendants.

Early Encounter

Around 6 AD, the emperor Augustus sent his general, the soon-to-be emperor Tiberius, marching deep into northern Europe in the attempt to stake out more territory for the expanding Roman Empire. A young military officer named Velleius accompanied him, and later recorded the following highlight of that expedition:

Even in the midst of these great events, I cannot refrain from inserting this little incident. We were encamped on the nearer bank of the aforesaid river while on the farther bank glittered the arms of the enemies' troops, who showed an inclination to flee at every movement and maneuver of our vessels, when one of the barbarians, advanced in years, tall of stature, of high rank, to judge by his dress, embarked in a canoe, made as is usual with them of a hollowed log, and guiding this strange craft, he advanced alone to the middle of the stream and asked permission to land without harm to himself on the bank occupied by our troops, and to see Caesar [Tiberius]. Permission was granted. Then he beached his canoe....After asking for and receiving permission to touch Caesar's hand³, he again entered his canoe, and continued to gaze back upon him until he landed upon his own bank.⁴

Here the Romans encountered a tall people, apparently respectful of others, who preferred to avoid battle, ready to disappear among the trees at a moment's notice. Notably, these key points are some of the defining characteristics of elven lore. By way of likely confirmation, the point of this recorded encounter is of distinct interest. Velleius describes it as happening at the “nearer bank of the aforesaid river.” Glancing back to the previous chapter to see which river he is referring to, the first river we find is the one which marked the high-water mark of the Roman advance into uncharted

1 One of the Old English spellings for “elf” is “alf”.

2 Called Danelaw for being the region subject to Danish laws. (The Viking kings Alfred contended with were reportedly Danish.)

3 This may well be the first recorded European example of a handshake. Many scholars today believe the practice traces to northern Europe.

4 C. Velleius Paterculus, Roman History. Book II, ch. 107.

territory. Velleius called it “the river Elbe” (or Albis), the name by which it is still known today both among English and German-speaking peoples. Notably, in German, elbe literally means “elves”.

I submit that although this is not the earliest recorded Roman encounter with this people,⁵ it is the first such encounter on the banks of the Elbe, where the tradition of elves likely has its origin.

We don't know whether the river was named by the Romans, by the people they encountered, or by some of their neighbors. Regardless, however the Romans happened to come to referring to this river, that name has stuck for two thousand years, and serves as a baseline for this inquiry.

Quite often, rivers were named after the people who settled there, just as towns were often named after their founders. In other instances, long after a river's name was well established, peoples may have been called after the river. Northumbrians (those living north of the River Humber) are just one of many European examples.

Thus if we are to search for the source of elven tradition in Europe, the most likely place to dig (figuratively) is among the peoples bordering the Elbe river, near the time of Christ.

Kingdom Shakers

Approximately three years after the encounter at the Elbe described above, the Roman Empire was given a tremendous shaking. A Roman Governor named Varus, who had previously ruled with blood and cruelty in Palestine alongside King Herod, attempted to repeat that pattern among the noble souls of northern Europe. In 9 AD, the people of the region rose up, under the leadership of Arminius, one of their own people trained previously in battle tactics by the Romans, and annihilated three Roman legions. Stunned, the emperor immediately ordered his remaining forces to retreat from and abandon the former Elbe boundary to the usurpers, and take up position along the Rhine. To this day, the Rhine forms the general boundary between Latin (French) speakers and German speakers. Rumors of the peoples of the Elbe marching on Rome caused quite a panic in Rome. The rumors may instead have been warning or prophecy, for they took a few centuries to materialize. In the 400's AD, the tribes from northern Europe descended on the Empire, destroyed it, and carved it up among themselves.

Elven Glory

With such a historical background, one might begin to understand how even the rumor of having elven or elven ancestors could fill many people in the Middle Ages with awe and respect. A half century after Arminius, their fame had reached as far away as Judea. It was a noble heritage. The people of the Elbe demanded just rulers, who answered to the voice of the people. They wouldn't tolerate anything else.

The region of the Elbe just happens to be where many of the English-speaking people of the world can trace their ancestry. Both the Angles (after whom Angle-land is named) and the Saxons departed from the Elbe region between 300 and 600 AD, and settled in Britain. Initially invited as a powerful mercenary force to help the beleaguered Britons, once the battles were over, the Britons chose not to honor their previous promises of reward to the newcomers. And in response, the newcomers rose up and replaced the rulers who had (i) breached their promise, (ii) oppressed their helpers, and thereby forfeited their right to rule.

It is from such vigilant people, and from such a tradition that we have the freedoms embodied in the voice of the governed, the Magna Carta, the Bill of Rights, and the U.S. Constitution. The core of that inspiration is (i) a government that serves and answers to the people, and (ii) one that is established with checks and balances, not just to ensure the rights of the people, but to keep temptations for public servants in check. One thing lacking is greater transparency/accountability.

Elves and Robin Hood

While considering the fame of Elves throughout northern Europe, there is reason to take a moment to compare the modern view of elves with that of Robin Hood and his merry men. Both were considered jovial by nature. Both were either outlaws or refugees from traditional civilization. Both lived in the woods and marshes. Like Robin and his men, elves were feared by some, but considered beneficial to mankind by many. That the latter was the predominant view among average people is suggested by the central place of elves in Christmas lore. There, elves supposedly labor all year to serve mankind, especially children. The elven theme parallels Robin Hood's theme of giving to the poor (even if it required discomfiting the rich). And finally, both elves and Robin's men were said to dress in green to hide more easily among the trees.

Thus I believe some of the fame of Robin Hood, if he actually existed, traces back to the earlier tradition of elven ancestors who had a parallel desire to serve the world, but remain detached from it. To serve the downtrodden, at the expense of the unjust. Open warfare was rarely their way. Stealth was their craft. Humor was their byword. Out of respect for life, they apparently avoided bloodshed.

Elven Ancestors

As mentioned above, one key reason that the stories of elves endured was the widespread belief that some

⁵ See Lombard Origins, by the same author, to trace backwards in time from the Elbe river. Or simply note that the Lombards initially received that name for their long beards – another potential link to Christmas lore.

Europeans descended from elves. A belief which has since vanished into the dust. The Irish used to believe it as recently as a century ago, as did the Scots. It has been centuries since the English and other nations believed it.

The proof of the tradition is in the pudding. The core evidence that elven lore is a likely glimpse of our heritage plays out in how the tradition has been ingeniously passed down from generation to generation. As each innocent child reaches sufficient maturity, they are then initiated into the unspoken secret that their parents are elves, and so are they. Thus the secret is not that elves don't exist. Instead, the embedded secret is that we are elves.

When Emperor Augustus died in 14 AD, his will decreed that a memorial of his accomplishments be engraved and posted prominently in cities throughout the empire. Despite the military setback and the imperial retreat five years earlier, the memorial of 14 AD claimed that the empire still spanned to the Elbe river. Thus this decree served to further the fame of the people of the Elbe, especially among most citizens who knew the true history of the region.

Thus there are two decrees from Augustus which play a key role in Christmas. The one in 14 AD, and the earlier, more important one. In your homes this winter, may the stories surrounding both of those decrees brighten your homes.

And it came to pass in those days, that there went out **a decree from Caesar Augustus**, that all the world should be taxed..
....And all went to be taxed, every one into his own city.

And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judaea, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem; (because he was of the house and lineage of David:)

To be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child.

And so it was, that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered.

And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn.

And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night.

And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid.

And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people.

For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.

And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.

And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying,

Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.

And it came to pass, as the angels were gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds said one to another, Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us.

And they came with haste, and found Mary, and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger.

And when they had seen it, they made known abroad the saying which was told them concerning this child.

And all they that heard it wondered at those things which were told them by the shepherds.

But Mary kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart.

And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told unto them.

Wishing You a Joyful Season.

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