Attila's Language-I
Scottas (Σκόττας), Adamis (Ἀδάμις), Edecōn (Ἐδέκων), Ērecan (Ἡρέκαν), Ēsla (Ἤσλα), and Onēgēsius (Ὀνηγήσιος)

Attila'nın Dili-I

● **Alexis Manaster Ramer**
Venice, California/
Amerika Birleşik Devletleri
manasterramer@gmail.com ●
orcid: 0009-0009-4174-1335 ●

Das Problem der Sprache der Hiung-nu - Hunnen gehört zu den meisten umstrittenen Problemen der Sprachwissenschaft [Poucha 1955: 287]

Es ist diesem Dialekt sonderbar mitgespielt worden von den Sprachgelehrten [Engels 1935 (written 1881/1882)].

Abstract

The language of Attila and his people yielded its first mystery when first Munkácsi and much later Pritsak identified the word "var" for 'river'. This already made it clear that this was one of the Lir Turkic languages (closely related to Chuvash, Bulgar, Avar, and Khazar). Still later Pritsak had the brilliant idea that the names of Attila's Huns, or at least many of them, were really titles or nicknames describing (sometimes humorously) either the position or some distinctive personality traits of each person. Only a few of his etymologies were close to correct (including three of those studied here) and few are fully correct. However, even though I refine some of his etymologies and replace most of the others totally, this only serves to show that his basic approach was correct. Also, his original conclusion that the language is Lir Turkic was right (even though later he wavered about this and looked for random connections to Mongolic). The present article is part one of a series.

Keywords: Lir Turkic Languages, Attila, Etymology, Munkácsi, Pritsak

Öz

Attila'nın ve halkının dilinin gizemi, ilk olarak Munkácsi tarafından daha sonra Pritsak'ın "nehir" anlamına gelen "var" kelimesini tanımlamasıyla ortaya koyulmuştur. Bu, sözcüğün Lir Türkçesinden (Çuvaşça, Bulgarca, Avarca ve Hazarca ile yakından ilişkili) biri olduğunu açıkça ortaya koymaktadır. Daha sonra Pritsak, Attila'nın Hunlarına ait isimlerin birçoğunun her bir kişinin konumunu ya da bazı ayırt edici kişilik özelliklerini (bazen mizahi bir şekilde) tanımlayan unvanlar veya lakaplar olduğuna dair parlak bir fikre sahipti. Burada incelenen üç etimolojinin de dahil olduğu bu etimolojilerin çok azı doğruydu. Bununla birlikte bu etimolojilerin bazılarını geliştirsem ve çoğunu tamamen değiştirsem bile bu yalnızca onun temel yaklaşımının doğru olduğunu göstermeye hizmet edecektir. Ayrıca Pritsak'ın bu dilin Lir Türkçesi olduğu yönündeki orijinal sonucu doğruydu, ancak daha sonra bu konuda tereddüt etti ve Moğolca ile rastgele bağlantılar aradı. Bu makale serinin birinci bölümüdür.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Lir Türk Dilleri, Attila, Etimoloji, Munkácsi, Pritsak

BABUR RESEARCH

Introduction

On a first reading I was bowled over (unlike some other scholars, who will now be very upset with me AGAIN) by MOST of what Pritsak (1954, 1982), in contrast to Doerfer (1973) and indeed practically to all other scholarship, was able to tease out of the scanty and poorly recorded corpus of (European)[1] Hunnish,[2] one word (**var** 'river')[3] and some 30 personal "names". There are, unsurprisingly, many details and a few rather more basic things that I feel need to be corrected. But this will only mean (if the basic theory is on the right track) that the results will actually be refined, or if you will, tightened and cleaned up—thus paving the way for a rather more robust next version of the theory. Which is just how we can (ever) know that any given theory in any field was on the right track to begin with. And this is what I propose to show here, by way of just beginning a complete reappraisal and revision of this theory.

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[1] European Hunn(ish or -ic) is not necessarily the same language as the the Asian Xiongnu. At the present time I say nothing about it—since I know nothing definite TO say. About the name of the European people and hence their language though we can say this: the sources we have for these are in Greek and Latin, and it is bizarre that Modern scholars glibly cut off the last syllable (Hunnoi Hunni) and even the second -n- to arrive at the familiar **Hun**. Obviously, it should be **Hunno** or the like. But it is of course difficult to fight with established usage.

[2] It seems to me that we cannot use the term Hunnic because that should be used for a language group. Of course, usage is king, and my suggestion may well be in vain.

[3] A part of this was anticipated by Munkácsi (1897), whose work Pritsak says he could not get a hold of. In any case, Pritsak's analysis is much superior. One other lexical item (which I believe I have figured out) is **stravam** or **strava**, so written in a Latin source in a context demanding the accusative case, so we cannot be sure whether the -m is the Latin accusative or perhaps part of the (uninflected) word. This has been endlessly misanalyzed by generations of scholars who followed the familiar scholarly procedure of 1868 and Miklosisch 1886) and then asserting without any discussion that this is the word and that it meant what those Germanic or Slavic words actually do NOT mean—a perfect case of academic mythopoesis, repeated by generations of scholars despite many protests. To make the long story short, the only genuine (Jordanes *Getica* 69.258) source says, concluding his detailed description of the funeral rites for Attila (and before getting to the actual burial), that "stravam super tumulum ejus, quam appellant, ipsi ingenti comissatione concelebrant (over his tomb they celebrated, with great revelling, what they call *strava [or stravam]*". The word thus either meant 'wake' (which has long been evident) or possibly (which may be my idea) even more simply the "great revelling" itself (i.e., the drinking that goes without saying, the loud singing that Jordanes explicitly mentions, and the like). Moreover, he even tells us what they sang, a song about Attila's unique achievements in life, ending in his even more unusual death (he died on his wedding night supposedly after himself passing out drunk and drowning in his own blood from a nose bleed—all of which was significant because as the song said that, since he was not killed by an enemy either in battle or casting an evil spell or the like, there was no need for his followers to avenge his death. Given all this, it seems to me that the word represents a noun derived either from **äsirgä-**"'to regret', whence (1) 'to be sorry for (someone)', (2) to regret to part with (something), to grudge'" (Clauson 1972: 252) or **äsür-** 'to be drunk' (p. 251) or indeed both ambiguously. The details of the derivation of course we cannot be sure about, but one can envisage purely hypothetically something like ***äsirgä-m ≈ *âsür-gän** (though this is difficult since in the later languages it is only agentive, so maybe easier ***âsür-gä**), depending on what happened in their speech to final nasals (which of course at least for now we cannot tell). Still, some of the sound changes required to get **strava(m)** are partly clearly established (notably the loss of vowels leading to those striking initial consonant clusters shared with Danube Bulgar and the change of **ä** to **a**) or are at least plausible (**sr-** > **str-** and, under some conditions, **-g-** > **-w-**). Of course, entirely unlike the existing approaches, I do not mean this to be an isolated etymology connected to nothing. It will stand or fall on whether these derivational suffixes and these sound changes can be shown to be consistent with the rest of the meager corpus and/or with the other Lir Turkic languages. I would hope that anyone the least bit familiar with language evolution will recognize that this approach is far sounder notably than the obsessive repetition by generations of than scholars (despite the protest of many of their own colleagues) of the completely absurd claim that this word is Germanic (where no such word exists anyway) or Slavic (there were no Slavs in Europe at the time, the Slavic word **strava** means 'food' and has no connection with wakes or revels, the one occurrence claimed to refer to a wake being a blatant falsehood, and anyway would have at the time if it existed at all, somewhere in Asia, something like ***yǐžǔtrawa.**

Permit me to illustrate, while at the same time raising my first general point of order. It was Pritsak's analysis of Σκόττας that particularly struck me on a first reading—and I begin here. This is one of the most IMMEDIATELY compelling of the FITTING-NAME (Aristotle's term that is constantly mistranslated by the sneering smattering classes as "speaking" or "talking name", which makes no sense and is anyway plainly not what Aristotle wrote in Greek—but who actually EVER bothers to check such things besides me?) analyses that Pritsak came up with. These are crucial because this is one of the few ways of getting over the most common problem one faces in analyzing proper names in poorly known languages, namely, that otherwise one could take them to mean anything (which typically renders such analyses, as in the case of almost all existing work on Scythian, worse than worthless). If, however, a substantial percentage of names in a given text or corpus are titles, epithets, or nicknames—and we have enough information about the bearers of these names to have some idea what someone might want to call them (and what not)—then things can become quite doable. I for example have always refused to believe that the **Dioscuri** named **Castor** and **Polydeuces** were really intended to be 'Beaver' and 'One with Much Sweet (*sc.* Wine)', and always will unless and until someone shows me some relevance of beavers and of quantities of sweet wine to the stories told about the heavenly horse twins. And on the other hand if these names happened to mean something '(First-)Born' and 'Last-Appearing' in a language that I discovered (an Anatolian language I call SCAMANDRIAN), then one immediately thinks of the morning and the evening star—and one can be practically certain that this all MUST be so (and of course that it should be ignored because it would upend the Applecart of Error that has been rolling for three thousand years or more and giving a very decent living to uncounted scholars considered experts on something they literally cannot know anything about, yes, the Homeric epics and the histories behind them).

In our case, Pritsak says that the man Scottas is "depicted as a hotspur and a blusterer" by the Eastern Roman diplomat who met him. This is perhaps too strong a formulation, but it is true that in one of the scenes where we encounter this Hunnish notable, what happens is that the Eastern Roman ambassador defies the instructions of the Hunnish party who come to meet him, and it is specifically Skottas who explodes in anger in response, Scottas and NOT the head of that party (Carolla 2008, excerpt 8.23-25, p. 20 lines 14-20), which might point to just such an emotional character.[4] In the second scene Scottas, to be sure not entirely unprovoked, claims to be equal in influence at Attila's court to his brother (exc. 8.36-38, p. 22 lines 24-25, p. 23 lines 1-12), which is obviously not true given that the brother is repeatedly portrayed as Attila's right-hand man (both in the

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[4]   But we should not be too sure: it is possible that in this culture it was beneath the dignity of the head man (who was Skottas' brother incidentally) to yell at the Romans, so that this could have been a cultural and not an individual psychological issue. The next story is the more telling one.

proverbial and the literal sense of the term)[5], and storms off to go to demonstrate it. So, it would seem that Pritsak may well have been exactly right to take Scottas' (nick)name as reflecting SOME SUCH aspect of the man's character as hot-headedness.

As with many (not all it seems) names in this corpus, then, this would not have been an actual name (as we conceive of names in our cultures anyway) but a description such as title or epithet or nickname, describing the person, what Aristotle called a "fitting name" (constantly mistranslated for the last three centuries as "talking/speaking name")—which is basically what has made any sort of analysis of this language possible. Indeed, this seems to me largely the key factor that allows us to be at least somewhat able to crack the secrets of this language. And so, Pritsak is surely right to base this "name" on the root **sök**-, which notably underlies the noun **sökmen** 'one who BREAKs the ranks of the (enemy) army' (Clauson 1972: 821). Please note that if the Hunnish names had had some arbitrary meanings (like 'Beaver' and 'One with Much Sweet' or even like those of our names like John, Michael, Thomas), the task would be hopeless.

However, the details of Pritsak's analysis need not be exactly correct and may be capable of improvement. In particular, while I grant his contention that this nickname is a noun is based on the CAUSATIVE stem **sök-it**-, I see no basis for his off-hand assumption that we are to take this as "apparently having the same meaning as [the] *verbum simplex*". There is no warrant for ignoring the specifically CAUSATIVE sense. And, if the "name" **Skottas** is really based on this CAUSATIVE stem (as it seems to be), then surely this also has to mean 'to CAUSE (s.o. else) to break (sc. the ranks, the line)'. This then turns out to be really very good for Pritsak's general point, even if it involves a small disagreement with him on this detail. Let me explain.

I propose that this was a SARCASTIC nickname, the causative being used to suggest that man does not walk the talk, that he boasts of things that someone else actually does, much as he did about his alleged rank at court, and so is humorously said to send others to do the charging while taking credit for it. This is why he is called 'one who causes (OTHERS) to break ranks', who sends OTHERS to perform heroic deeds. This would fit his recorded character so well that it makes me anyway (I do not know about the Gentle Reader) marvel at the robustness of the analysis we end up with.

Thus, as I said, this is the first example of where the details may have to be refined, but when fixed, only serve to STRENGTHEN the basic analysis. The next two "names" I turn to involve this same kind of issue as well (and probably most will) but they are also the first examples of another sort of issue. Etymology after all involves semantics and pragmatics (responses to realia, i.e., aspects of the world) but obviously also those aspects of language that are the joy of most linguists and the despair of historians, anthropologists, archeologists, and others who depend on the same philological material:

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[5] In the next scene, where Scottas simply is sent by Attila to summon the Romans to him as well as in the remaining scene, where Scottas is Attila's ambassador to Constantinople, no hot-headed or blustering behavior is recorded.

sounds (phonetics and phonology), word structure (morphology), and so on. I once met, at a party at the University of Michigan a girl who turned out to be a graduate student of the Ancient Near Eastern who literally started crying when she learned I taught linguistics. She was being forced to study this strange subject, and just could not hack it.

The specific technical issue here is the long-standing squabbles in Turcology (begun by Benzing 1940 so far as I can see and never settled since then, even though the answer is as plain to me in 2024 as it was to Clauson in 1972 and before) about the date of the change of postvocalic ***-d**- to **–r**- in the Lir languages. Pritsak claims to have shown that this had NOT occurred in the attestated Hunnish, but I do not believe that the data support him. For, the two etymologies that Pritsak offers that seem to show such a retained ***-d**- in Hunnish names in fact are not probative. They do show an intervocalic **–d**- sound: **Adamis** and **Edecōn**, but why should we ASSUME that this MUST be from ***-d**-? By the way, this kind of fallacious reasoning is a very frequent conceptual error in many different fields of historical linguistics—and other fields (and of course when this happens in the courts or hospitals, the consequences can be literally deadly, no less so than when historians and linguists prostitute science, as has so often happened, in the service of some ideology).

Adamis (Ἀδάμις) was the name of "the steward in charge of the queen's affairs", and Pritsak is surely right to guess that he would have to have been, therefore, a eunuch. The idea that his name is yet another title or epithet or nickname rather than an actual name—in short another fitting name—is good too. So too is the core of the etymology, relating the stem **Adam**- to such words as medieval Turkic **atan** or **at(a)ğân** 'gelded camel' and Yakut **attā**- to castrate, geld' (Pekarskii 1907: 195).[6] This does mean that **Adamis** is derived from the (hypothetical) root ***ad**- (***at**- in ÈSTIa I: 220),[7] but the question is HOW it is derived.

The very forms cited as cognates (**atan** or **at(a)ğân** and **attā**) show that the etymon did not have a mere intervocalic ***–d**-. First, if the root was really ***at**-, then the Hunnish "name" would be derived from ***at-am**- rather than ***ad-am**-, and the voicing we see would be some minor secondary development. Second, even if the root was ***ad**-, our word could be derived not directly from the root itself but rather from the stem that Pritsak himself takes as ***ad-da**- (but ***at-ta**- in ÈSTIa).[8] In short, either a root ***at**- instead

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6   Though when dealing with Yakut one has to be extra careful about the possibility of influence from Mongolic.

7   It has long seemed to me that this is not a separate root but a specialized sense of a root that I was delighted to discover had already been anticipated (notably by Starostin et al. 2003: 1128 when they write: "This all seems to indicate a primary root ***ạt**- meaning both 'to cling, hitch on to smth., grasp' and 'a grasp, handful'"). A rare point of agreement! In the case of words referring to castration this verb (and its derivates) would, I submit, have referred to the CRUSHING BY HAND of a (part of) male animal's external genitalia. There are, incidentally, at least two other, hitherto-unnoticed derivates of this root, including not only the obvious Turkic **adut** 'handful' but also the neglected Danube Bulgar τζιγ-ΑΤ(ος) = **чиг-ОТ(ъ)** 'sword-BEARER' and the Khazar title (usually read quite differently and hence not analyzed at all) **uvš-AD** lit. 'one HOLDING IN HIS HAND crumbling (sc. firewood)'.

8   Presumably it is not ***att⁰** because it seems to me that that must be what the "name" **Attila** begins with, though of course that too we should not prejudge. Maybe it could be from ***ad-ga**-?

of ***ad**- and/or a stem with a cluster such as ***-d-d**- would mean that this is not an example of a medial, intervocalic ***-d**-. And none of those alternative reconstructions, whether with ***-t**- or a cluster, would, of course, be expected to undergo Lir rhotacism.

Somewhat more complex is the case of **Edecōn (Ἐδέκων),** who was "one of Attila's most powerful lieutenants and served as ambassador to the Roman emperor in 449". More intricate but not prohibitively so. Here I again accept much of Pritsak's analysis but not all. According to him, this is a deverbal noun from **edär-** 'to pursue, follow' ending in **–gUn**. This analysis involves two well-known sound changes, one apparently pan-Turkic (**rg** > **rk** as part of a more general devoicing rule after various sonorants), the other well documented in Lir, though perhaps not regularly (the frequent loss of **r** before a consonant).

Where I am less happy is when Pritsak says that this ***edär-gun**- could have meant 'follower, *hence* (Attila's) retainer'. This seems just a bit thin. Were they not all Attila's followers? Perhaps, though Pritsak ignored this possibility, the word could have meant *'pursu-er' instead, which is how I am guessing the related Chuvash **yerkĕn** comes to mean 'lover' < *'suitor' (here the root is not inherited but borrowed from another Turkic language, but I am only citing this for the semantics, so the fact that it is borrowed does not matter). And if so, then why not a different kind of pursuer, namely, *'plaintiff, claimant' or the like? The latter meaning would fit the facts quite well, describing the man's known role at the Eastern Roman court, where he was sent not just for fun or (as in modern times) to attend diplomatic functions but rather to press, to pursue (so the sources very clearly indicate) specific claims and demands that Attila sent him to present, moreover quite imperiously, to the *Basileus*.[10] To be sure, there were other embassies, and it was not always Edecōn who was sent on these (in fact we see Scottas on one of these missions too), so we cannot be totally sure.

In either case, though, the retention of the ***–d**- in this "name" would AGAIN not be a deviation from the rules of Lir Turkic, though this time for a different reason than above. Specifically, as discovered a century ago by Ramstedt (1922-1923) and rediscovered a half century later by Clark (1978), in Chuvash **d**-rhotacism did not happen before an **r** immediately OR EVEN INTERMEDIATELY following, and there is thus no expectation that it would in Hunnish—if this is really a closely related language (as seems obvious to me that it was). Of course, attested Chuvash has **y** from ***–d**- before such a following **–r**-, but this can be a much later (and more local) sound change. In Hunnish it may be that the **–d**- simply did not change at all (or changed too subtly for the Greek, or any other known, sources to reflect it).[11]

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[10] Béla Kempf (p.c.) points out that Chinggis Khan's ambassador's "name" **Itürgen** would be precisely this word too. And this would of course serve to confirm my interpretation of the meaning over Pritsak's.

[11] There may even be another possibility too. The man was as we said sent on an embassy to the Roman emperor. What if he was not named either as Attila's follower or as claimant, but rather as *chargé d'affairs*, the man appointed to get things done, and in particular to make others (namely, the Romans) do them. Then the verb underlying his name could have been **ettür**-, which has just the last meaning. Here the phonology would fit the Mongol ambassador's "name" better, too—and of course it would have not be an original ***-d**- sound in it at all. Of course, this would demand that we explain why Attila's name is consistently written with **–tt**-, whereas Edecōn's has **–d**-. I do not know at this moment whether this can be done, and that is why I put this suggestion in a footnote.

In short, neither of these two "names" shows the retention of ***-d-** in this language. And so far everything supports both the basic approach to these "names" followed (brilliantly in my opinion) by Pritsak (much of whose other work I do not find nearly as inspiring) and the close connection of Hunnish to Lir Turkic.

Of course, almost all the "names" need re-examination, and at least some of them will need re-analysis. There are also a few other words besides these "names". And then there is the Asian Hunnish. There is much to be done. Some of it I believe I have already gotten done but not always painlessly (the "name" of Attila's chief wife took me months).[12] So this will take some time. Not a century or a century and a half though. I do not plan to live that long, and I do not see anyone volunteering to take my place.

To go back to my most basic point: some Readers may think that such suggested revisions to Pritsak's proposals invalidate his proposal and even that they show that nothing can be known. This would be a tragic misapprehension. Some revision almost always happens when a new theory is proposed in any science, and on the other hand, it is not necessary (and again this is true even in physics) that everything be knowable and known. It may very well be that at the end of the day certain etymologies and certain sound laws remain uncertain. That is as it should be and not in any way shape or form an objection to the approach or the particular theory.

The same pattern repeats itself as I look at other "names" in the corpus. The next one I would like to consider is **Onēgēsius (Ὀνηγήσιος)**, described as Attila's chief minister "who held power second only to Attila". Pritsak's analysis smacks of desperation: Mongolic (why not Zulu?) ***üne-** 'to believe' (or the like) is said to combine with the Turkic suffix **-gās** supposed to be that of a *nomen futuri (necessitatis)*, which just happens to occur here in the form **-gāsi**. And this then is taken to mean 'honest, faithful, truthful, loyal'. This is not compelling pragmatically. Worse, the initial **ü-** should obviously correspond to **vi-** in a Lir language—exactly the way **ö-** corresponds to **va-**[13]. In contrast, I would propose that this is a complex of the two highest ministerial titles we have available to us in Old Turkic **ïnāg**

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12   Perhaps it will do no harm (anyway, who is reading this?) to say that I am rather sure that this is ἡρέκαν <ērékan> [irekan] < ***urï—irk-(g)an**, from **urï** "'male child, son' [...] exclusively masculine" and an agent participle (-**än** or -**gän**) from the verb **irk-**'to collect or assemble (things [...]' [...] 'to heap up'" (Clauson 1972: 197, 221), referring to her role as the mother of Attila's heirs. Apart from the well-known loss of r before a consonant (Pritsak 1954 and passim), this agrees, beyond my wildest dreams, with the fact of her being the mother of the three sons that got to inherit his empire (and lose it). And why am I sure? It is because I tried so hard for so many months in so many ways and found that there seems to be no other possibility given the lexicon and word-formation rules of Turkic (not to mention, which is also methodologically important even crucial, that I had no knowledge of the particular words in advance, and so—quite different from much existing scholarship—I could not have "cooked" this result up). In short, the odds (and yes this is all about odds) of my getting this result if it were not valid, as mere noise in the data or worse as a result of cherry picking the data seem poor. I am also rather confident that the "name" of his Talleyrand (as I call him), **Isla**, is Turkic **uslug** "discriminating, of sound judgement' (Clauson 1972: 247). Note the loss of -g in the latter, and the fronting of Turkic **u** in both "names". Ok, that is all you get for now. Who am I kidding? Surely, I am as usual talking to myself again. Pritsak's etymologies in contrast assume wrong forms of the names (**Krekan**, which is merely an old corruption, and **Esla**) and semantics that are totally unrevealing, not to mention for the queen's name he assumes a bizarrely Mongolic etymon.

13   This defeats some other etymologies of Pritsak's too, to be discussed in the future.

'[…] someone desired and trusted; a friend with whom one does not stand on ceremony; a royal representative or senior minister' (Clauson 1972: 182) and **agīčī** 'treasurer' (p. 80). To be sure I cannot as yet fully explain the vowels: where we find an apparent ï sound (written as Greek ēta) for Shaz Turkic **a**, I am guessing (and time will tell whether I am right) that these are among the cases of the well-known correspondence Lir **ï**: Shaz **a**. I am even less sure the first vowel ends up as **o** I cannot say at present. One thing I CAN is that the loss of how the word-final (here, prepound-final) **-g** in **ïnāg**- > **onē**- is exactly right. This is the same as in **Ēsla** < **uslug** and perhaps, as I hope to discuss eventually, **Attila** < SOMETHING-**lïg**. For now though it seems a far better analysis than has been available till now—and once again the KIND of result that (despite the disagreement with Pritsak's own analysis) first of all supports his overall theory and second could hardly be just noise in the data.

Speaking of which, this is 2024 and we are still at the beginning of the beginning. Some of the rest of the material is clear to me, but there has not been the time to write it up, and much is still far from done. But this is, Virginia, how it does get done. And then you do not get taken out to dinner. You get ignored instead. Because that is the way of scholarship, where *Ira scholastica* and *Odium philologicum* take the place of the Golden Rule. It is my sole unfulfilled ambition in life to help tear this evil system down brick by brick and replace it with a better one.

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