

Singing the Past: Turkic and Medieval Heroic Poetry.

***Folklore Forum* 36.1 (2005).**

[David Elton Gay](#)
Indiana University

Singing the Past: Turkic and Medieval Heroic Poetry. By Karl Reichl. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000. Appendices, Works Cited, Index.

In *Singing the Past* Karl Reichl explores modes of comparison of heroic epic, particularly between modern Turkic epics and those of the medieval Germanic peoples. Reichl's method, though he does make some suggestions towards genetic relationships, is largely typological: his interest is to examine how we might use living traditions of heroic poetry to illuminate those of the past, where we have little if any access to anything other than manuscript contexts for the poetry.

In many ways the comparison of Turkic and Germanic traditions seems unlikely to produce much of interest—the known contexts of Germanic poetry are quite different from the living traditions of Turkic heroic epic, for instance, and Reichl himself notes that the “choice of Turkic oral epic poetry might at first seem arbitrary, and to a certain point it is.” (9)—but Reichl's typological approach “frees [his] interpretation from false hopes or claims about common origins or mutual influences and clears the way for questions about poetics and aesthetics” (8).

Reichl's book is especially strong in its examination of the relationship between epic and history. As students of epic have long assumed that there is a core of history in most of the epics they study, this is a particularly important aspect of the epic to think about: Just what is happening in heroic epics, which are obviously concerned with history of some sort, like *Beowulf* or the *Shahnameh*? As Reichl notes, epics such as these are often “a poetic representation of [the] tribal past, of a heroic age, into which the roots of [the group's] ethnicity reach” (177). Heroic epics are thus not history in the modern historians sense of the term, but are nonetheless important culturally as “a poetic reflection of (and on) the past...” (178). This approach, though it does, as Reichl notes,

raise problems of its own, breaks with the former emphasis on historicity in some very productive ways, for, if nothing else, it opens the possibility of taking the poetry on its own cultural terms, rather than the imposed concepts of the academic visitor.

Although I do have some disagreements with Reichl's work, and find that some of his proposals do not work, he has nonetheless written a book that will be very useful to scholars of medieval and modern oral epic. In *Singing the Past* Karl Reichl has gone a long way towards defining how we should do comparative studies, and for that reason his book should be read by anyone working in comparative epic, or comparative folk narrative more generally.