

MEMORY OF THE WORLD REGISTER

The Song of the Nibelungs, a heroic poem from mediaeval Europe (Germany)

Ref N° 2008-19

PART A – ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

1 SUMMARY

The Nibelungenlied (translated as The Song of the Nibelungs) is probably the most famous heroic poem in Middle High German. It may well be compared to other world-famous epics such as the epic of Gilgamesh written in Ancient Babylonia, the Mahabharata in Ancient India, or the Heike Monogatari in mediaeval Japan. It tells the story of the dragon-slayer Siegfried from his childhood days and his marriage to Kriemhild to his murder and the subsequent story of Kriemhild's revenge, finally culminating in the extinction of the Burgundians or Nibelungs at the court of the Huns.

Originally based upon older oral tradition, it was written down about or shortly after the year 1200. Today, it is known only in the versions that have come down to us in 37 manuscripts and manuscript fragments dating from the thirteenth to the sixteenth century. The poem very likely came into being, as modern scholarship assumes, at the court of Wolfger von Erla, bishop of Passau / Bavaria from 1191 to 1204. The strophic poem in 39 *âventiuren* (i.e. sections within the plot) forms an important part of the German literature in the decades before 1200, the so-called classical times of Middle High German literature. It must have enjoyed great popularity in the following centuries as well.

In the sixteenth century, however, it fell almost totally into oblivion. The modern reception began in 1755 when codex C was rediscovered in Hohenems castle in Vorarlberg (Austria). In this context two aspects were of great importance: First of all the research conducted by scholars of the nineteenth century, in particular the edition of the Nibelungenlied by Karl Lachmann. It was he who labelled the *Leithandschriften* (primary manuscripts) A, B, and C, and his edition is a milestone in the development of textual criticism as a method of Germanic philology which was then in its infancy. In the nineteenth century the Nibelungenlied also had a huge impact as a national epic poem both in numerous illustrations and in the treatment of the subject in Richard Wagner's musical dramas. The historical nucleus of the poem, the myth of Siegfried and the story of the destruction of the Burgundians at the court of the Huns, dates back to the time of the migration of nations in the fifth and sixth centuries A.D. and has become known in large parts of Europe, in particular from Scandinavia to Spain. The form of the singable stanzas belongs to the older heroic poetry, too. Three of the eleven entirely preserved manuscripts date back to the thirteenth century, each of which passes on another revision of the text. Codex A preserves the shortest version, which probably still expects from its readers to have a notion of the oral text. Codex B, some decades older than A, contains beside the Nibelungenlied some other Middle High German epic poems. It forms part of the collections of the Monastic Library of St. Gall in Switzerland that was listed as a World heritage site by UNESCO in 1983. The oldest codex C represents a revised and expanded version of the text. These three manuscripts from the first century after the genesis of the poem are not only the earliest but at the same time the most important manuscripts for the constitution of the text.

Up to this day, no manuscript of a heroic poem of world literature has been listed on the Memory of the World register. The Nibelungenlied is hence the first example of heroic poetry to be nominated.

2 DETAILS OF THE NOMINATOR

2.1 Name

Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, München

2.2 Relationship to the documentary heritage nominated

Owner of manuscript (A), also acting on behalf of the Stiftsbibliothek St. Gallen in Switzerland and the Badische Landesbibliothek in Karlsruhe, Germany, owning manuscripts (B) and (C). The consent of the owners has been given. Please find enclosed two letters from Switzerland that support the nomination.

2.3 Contact person

Dr. Rolf Griebel

2.4 Contact details

Bayerische Staatsbibliothek Ludwigstraße 16 80539 München Telefon: ++49 89 28638-2206
Fax: ++49 89 28638-2200 Email: direktion@bsb-muenchen.de URL: <http://www.bsb-muenchen.de/>

3 IDENTITY AND DESCRIPTION OF THE DOCUMENTARY HERITAGE

3.1 Name and identification details of the items being nominated

- A) Nibelungenlied, codex A Bayerische Staatsbibliothek Ludwigstraße 16 80539 München Germany
- B) Nibelungenlied, codex B Stiftsbibliothek St. Gallen Klosterhof 6D 9004 St. Gallen Switzerland
- C) Nibelungenlied, codex C
Badische Landesbibliothek
Erbprinzenstraße 15 76133
Karlsruhe Germany

3.2 Description

3.2.1 Description and inventory

- A) Vellum manuscript, beginning 4th quarter of the 13th century. 60 leaves (pag. 1 – 119) measuring 255 x 180 mm. Texts: p. 1a – 94a Nibelungenlied, p. 94a – 116a Nibelungenklage, p. 116a – 119 short religious texts added in the beginning of the 14th century. Illumination: initial Lombard capitals in red.
- B) Vellum manuscript, 2nd third of the 13th century. 318 leaves (pag. 1 – 693) measuring 315 x 215 mm. Texts: p. 5 – 288 Wolfram von Eschenbach: Parzifal (D), p. 291 – 451 Nibelungenlied and Nibelungenklage, p. 452 – 558 Stricker: Karl der Große (C), p. 561 – 691 Wolfram von Eschenbach: Willehalm (G), p. 693 stanzas by Friedrich von Sonnenburg (G), addendum. Illumination: 79 partly historiated initials of different sizes, initial Lombard capitals in red and blue.
- C) Vellum manuscript, 2nd quarter of the 13th century. 114 leaves measuring 245 x 170 mm. Texts: f. 1r – 89r Nibelungenlied, f. 89r – 114 v Nibelungenklage. Illumination: Two initials with

split borders, silhouette initials in blue and red, initial Lombard capitals in red.

3.2.2 Bibliographic and registration details

A) München, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Cgm 34 B) St. Gallen, Stiftsbibliothek, Cod. 857 C) Karlsruhe, Badische Landesbibliothek, Cod. Donaueschingen 63

3.2.3 Summary of its provenance

The three vellum copies of the Nibelungenlied, which had been written in the thirteenth century in the Alemannic or Bavarian language area within the Alps region, were rediscovered as late as the eighteenth century. Two of the manuscripts were found in the library of the Counts of Hohenems in Vorarlberg (Austria) in 1755 (codex C) and in 1779 (codex A). The third manuscript (codex B), which had been kept among the holdings of the Swiss historian Aegidius Tschudi in the sixteenth century, was sold to the Prince-Abbot of St. Gall in Switzerland by one of Tschudi's descendants in 1768. The two Hohenems manuscripts were given to the jurist Michael Schuster, who then lived in Prague, by the last Countess of Hohenems in 1807. The Court and State Library in Munich acquired codex A in 1810, whereas codex C was purchased by the collector Joseph von Laßberg in 1815 when staying in Vienna. After his death in 1855, it became part of the Court Library of the Princes of Fürstenberg at Donaueschingen in Germany. In 2001, it was acquired both by the Landesbank Baden-Württemberg and the Federal Republic of Germany and has been preserved in the Badische Landesbibliothek Karlsruhe ever since.

3.2.4 Assessment of physical state and condition

The manuscripts are in good condition. They have been preserved as part of the holdings in public research libraries in Munich, St. Gallen and Karlsruhe. They are kept in a particularly secure and controlled environment.

3.2.5 Visual documentation

Full facsimile reproductions with commentaries exist of all three manuscripts. Two of the manuscripts are available in full versions as electronic facsimiles on CD-ROM and on the internet, respectively.

- A) Das Nibelungenlied nach der Hohenems-Münchener Handschrift (A) in phototypischer Nachbildung (The Song of the Nibelungs according to the Hohenems-Munich manuscript (A) in phototypical reproduction). München 1886. [full facsimile in black and white]
- B) Das Nibelungenlied und die Klage. Handschrift B (Cod. Sangall. 857) (The Song of the Nibelungs and the Lament. Manuscript B (Cod. Sangall. 857)). Köln 1962. [facsimile in black and white] Parzival, Nibelungenlied und Klage, Karl der Große, Willehalm (Parzival, Song of the Nibelungs and Lament, Charlemagne, Willehalm). CD-Rom mit einem Begleitheft. 2. erw. Aufl. St. Gallen 2005. [full electronic facsimile on CD-Rom]
- C) Das Nibelungenlied und die Klage. Handschrift C der F. F. Hofbibliothek Donaueschingen (The Song of the Nibelungs and the Lament. Manuscript C of the Court Library at Donaueschingen). 2 Bde. Stuttgart 1968. [full facsimile] Die Nibelungen-Handschrift C digital (The Nibelung manuscript C in digital version). <http://www.blb-karlsruhe.de/blb/blbhtml/nib/uebersicht.html> [full electronic facsimile]

3.2.6 Bibliography

Die Nibelungen. Sage – Epos – Mythos (The Nibelungs. Legend – epic – myth). Hg. von Joachim Heinzle, Klaus Klein und Ute Obhof. Wiesbaden 2003.

Müller, Jan-Dirk: Das Nibelungenlied (The Song of the Nibelungs). Berlin 2002. (Klassiker-Lektüren 5).

Bumke, Joachim: Die vier Fassungen der ‚Nibelungenklage‘. Untersuchungen zur Überlieferungsgeschichte und Textkritik der höfischen Epik im 13. Jahrhundert (The four versions of the ‚Lament of the Nibelungs‘. Studies in textual transmission and criticism of Courtly Epic in the 13th century). Berlin 1996.

3.2.7 Referees

Prof. Dr. Joachim Heinzle, Philipps-Universität Marburg, Institut für Deutsche Philologie des Mittelalters, Wilhelm-Röpke-Str. 6 A, 35032 Marburg (Professor at the University of Marburg; specialist in mediaeval German philology)

Dr. Dr. h. c. Karin Schneider, Luitpoldstraße 9, 82211 Herrsching (formerly Curator at the Bavarian State Library, Munich; specialist in mediaeval German manuscripts)

4 JUSTIFICATION FOR INCLUSION/ASSESSMENT AGAINST CRITERIA

4.1 Authenticity

Since the discovery and scientific classification of the three manuscripts A, B and C in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries there has been a continuous documentation of ownership. The three manuscripts were acquired by the present owners in the years 1768, 1810, and 2001 respectively.

4.2 World significance, uniqueness and irreplaceability

The significance of the heroic poem for mediaeval Europe is comparable to that of the epic of Gilgamesh for Ancient Babylonia, the Mahabharata for Ancient India, or the Heike Monogatari for mediaeval Japan. On a European scale, epics of similar importance are, as far as antiquity is concerned, the Iliad and the Odyssey; as regards mediaeval times, Beowulf in Old English or the French Chanson de Roland may be mentioned. The three manuscripts of the Nibelungenlied are unique. Each one transmits another version of the text. The text of the Nibelungenlied, one of the rare examples of heroic poetry in German literature, forms an important part of the world literature.

4.3 Criterion (a) – Time

Written in the thirteenth century, that is within the first century after the origin of the poem, the three codices represent the earliest written versions of the Nibelungenlied. The poem originated in the so-called classical time of Middle High German literature. The nucleus of the saga, however, dates back until the fifth and sixth centuries A.D., the time of the migration of nations in early mediaeval Europe.

Criterion (b) – Place

The place of origin of the manuscripts has not yet been exactly established. They were written in the Alemannic or Bavarian language area within the Alps region; the origin of the poem was in or near Passau / Bavaria, a German town at the Danube near the frontier with Austria. The story takes place in Central Europe along the Rhine and the Danube, corresponding to the modern states of Germany, Austria, and Hungary. An episode even takes place in Iceland. Pictorial testimonies from Norway, Sweden, the Isle of Man, and Spain prove the saga's dissemination both in Scandinavia and in the Iberian Peninsula.

Criterion (c) – People

The anonymity of the author has its reason in the history of heroic poetry, where the author

only transmits historical truths. The aforementioned anonymity is also an indication of the fact that the epic used to be passed on orally before it was finally written down. From other heroic poems we do not know the author's name either. The names of the scribes and the patrons of the manuscripts have not yet been identified. We only know the patron of the unknown poet, Wolfger von Erla, who was bishop of Passau / Bavaria from 1191 to 1204.

Criterion (d) – Subject and theme

The roots of the myth of the Nibelungs date back to the early Middle Ages. The saga reflects the memory of a disastrous defeat of the Eastern German tribe of the Burgundians, who, advancing from the Rhine to Roman Gaul, suffered a crushing defeat by the Roman general Aëtius and Hunnic troops in about 436 A.D. The tradition of the death of Attila, king of the Huns, who is said to have died in the year 453 A.D. on his wedding night with the German girl Hildico, has been added to the myth of the Burgundians. This story has also been connected with the tradition of Siegfried the dragon-slayer that may be rooted in the Merovingian history of the sixth century. All in all, the story depicting a catastrophe has become a national epic which exerted wide influence on the history of thought, literature, art, and music for centuries. It marks the ending of antiquity and the birth of Europe.

Criterion (e) – Form and style

There is a characteristic form of the singable stanzas of the Nibelungenlied, which is accordingly called “Nibelungenstrophe” (translated as Nibelungen stanza). The stanza of four long lines, divided by a pause in “Anvers” and “Abvers”, was also used by the Kürenberger, one of the earliest known minstrels of mediaeval German literature, in about 1150 or 1160.

4.4 Rarity, integrity, threat and management

The three manuscripts of the Nibelungenlied are unique. All of them are complete. They are in a good state of preservation and in secure condition.

5 LEGAL INFORMATION

5.1 Owner of the documentary heritage

Bavarian State Library, Munich (as mentioned above 2.4) [A]

Monastic Library St. Gallen (as mentioned above 3.1) [B]

Regional Library of the State of Baden (as mentioned above 3.1) [C]

5.2 Custodian of the documentary heritage

Dr. Rolf Griebel (contact details as mentioned above 2.4) [A]

Prof. Dr. Ernst Tremp [B]

Dr. Peter Michael Ehrle [C]

5.3 Legal status

(a) Category of ownership

Public (A, B, C)

(b) Accessibility

Public access to the manuscripts is restricted to scholars with a justified research interest

(codicologists, philologists, art historians) and upon application to the holding institutions. On rare occasions, the manuscripts are displayed in exhibitions to the general public. On the other side, modern editions and translations of the text are widespread all over the world. For facsimile editions of the manuscripts see above 3.2.5.

(c) Copyright status

The copyright of the manuscripts is held by the owning institutions.

(d) Responsible administration

Safekeeping and handling of the manuscripts are in the responsibility of trained staff of the holding institutions, normally the department of manuscripts (with exception of B), where appropriate managerial procedures for the preservation of and the access to the heritage in custody are established.

(d) Other factors

none

6 MANAGEMENT PLAN

6.1 Management plan for this documentary heritage

The manuscripts are preserved as part of the holdings of the three libraries. All manuscripts are in a good state of preservation and in secure condition. In recent years, printed and electronic facsimiles were produced of the manuscripts (see above 3.2.5). Plans for the digitization of codex A will be drawn up in the future.

7 CONSULTATION

7.1 Details of consultation about the nomination with the

(a) Owner

Bavarian State Library (for the Free State of Bavaria) [A]

Monastic Library St. Gallen, Letter of Prof. Dr. Ernst Tremp, August 23, 2007 [B]

Regional Library of the State of Baden, Mail of Dr. Peter M. Ehrle, November 20, 2006 [C]

(b) Custodian

Dr. Rolf Griebel [A]

Prof. Dr. Ernst Tremp [B]

Dr. Peter Michael Ehrle [C]

(c) National or regional Memory of the World Committee

German Memory of the World Committee (September 2007, February 2008).

PART B – SUBSIDIARY INFORMATION

8 ASSESSMENT OF RISK

8.1 Nature and scope of threats to this documentary heritage

²The manuscripts are kept in a particularly secure and controlled environment.

9 ASSESSMENT OF PRESERVATION

9.1 Preservation context of the documentary heritage

All manuscripts are in a good state of preservation and in secure condition. The keeping and handling of the manuscripts are in the responsibility of trained staff of the holding institutions.

PART C – LODGEMENT

This nomination is lodged by:

Dr. Rolf Griebel
Generaldirektor der Bayerischen Staatsbibliothek

2008-03-27