



A Note on the Historical Prototype of Sigfried

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NOTES AND DOCUMENTS

A NOTE ON THE HISTORICAL PROTOTYPE OF SIGFRIED

That the legend of the fall of the Burgundians, as preserved in the *Nibelungenlied* and its Norse analogues, rests upon traditional recollection of historic facts is now well established. The case is quite different, however, with Sigfried and Brunhild. The majority of scholars regard these figures as purely mythical. Andreas Heusler has emphatically upheld this view;¹ indeed, his contention that the historical element in Germanic heroic poetry is relatively slight² has tended to discourage any attempt to identify with specific historical figures those legendary heroes in whose careers supernatural elements play any considerable part.

One such identification, however, is decidedly plausible: Holz's suggestion that Sigfried and Brunhild are, respectively, Sigebert, king of the Austrasian Franks, and the West Gothic princess Brunichild, whom he married in 567. Holz points to a number of striking resemblances between the careers of these historical figures and those of Sigfried and Brunhild: the similarities in name, the possession by the hero of a remarkable treasure coveted by his kindred, the murder of the hero.³

It can hardly be denied that the legend of Sigfried and Brunhild bears a resemblance to the fates of the Frankish king and his wife sufficiently close if we take into consideration the changes and embellishments made by the poets who handed down the tale from generation to generation. No more close is the resemblance between the legend of Ermanaric, as preserved in the Elder Edda and in Snorri, and the account, in Ammianus Marcellinus, of the death of the historical Ermanaric. On the other hand, in the Ermanaric legend the hero's name remains unchanged. The name *Sigfried* is by no means identical with *Sigebert*. Herein lies the weakness of Holz's theory.

Holz himself was aware of that weakness, but saw the justification of his view in the fact that there is a similar variation in the hero's name in the Middle High German and Norse versions (Sigfried-Sigurör): ". . . Wir finden also drei Formen nebeneinander, die althochdeutsch *Sigiberht*, *Sigifried*, *Sigiwart* heissen würden; der zweite Teil ist verschieden, überall aber beginnt

¹ *Nibelungensage und Nibelungenlied* (2d ed.; Dortmund, 1922), pp. 7, 14; *Die altgermanische Dichtung* (Berlin-Neubabelsberg, 1923), p. 88.

² *Geschichtliches und Mythisches in der germanischen Heldensage* ("Sitzungsberichte der Kön.-preuss. Akad. der Wissenschaften" [1909], pp. 920 ff.).

³ *Der Sagenkreis der Nibelungen* (Leipzig, 1907), pp. 70 ff. Theodor Abeling (*Das Nibelungenlied* [1907]) also identified Brunhild with the historical Brunichild; but the identification Sigfried-Sigebert was first proposed by Holz. Abeling contended that the hero's historical prototype was Segeric, son of the Burgundian prince Sigimund.

et mit Labial, schliesst mit Dental und erhält *r*; die Vertauschung der Formen ist also leicht begreiflich."⁴

Nevertheless, Holz's case would be strengthened if it could be proved that the names *Sigebert* and *Sigfried* actually were confused at a time anterior to the composition of the *Nibelungenlied* and the final development of the legend. If the confusion had occurred once, it could occur again, and could give rise to a fixation of the name.

That this confusion actually did take place is proved by a passage in a Norman chronicle of the ninth or tenth century. Under the year 883, in the account of the siege of Paris by *Sigefridus*, leader of the Northmen, we find the following: "Gauzlinus vero Episcopus dum populum sibi commissum iuuare vellet, cum *Sigeberto* Rege Northmannorum amicitiam firmavit, vt per hoc civitas ab obsidione liberaretur."⁵ Langebek notes the scribal error in his edition of the chronicle,⁶ but does not mention its implications.

It is clear, then, that the names *Sigebert* and *Sigfried* were not so dissimilar that they could not be confused; nor can their dissimilarity be regarded longer as a bar to the acceptance of Holz's identification.

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CAROLINE A. BRADY

*THE HOUS OF FAME AND RENAUD DE BEAUJEU'S
LI BIAUS DESCOUNEÛS*

No parallel has, so far as I know, been adduced to the following passage in Chaucer's account of the castle of Fame:

. . . and ful eke of wyndowes,
As flakes falle in grete snowes.
And eke in ech of the pynacles
Weren sondry habitacles;
In which stoden, al withoute—
Ful the castel, al aboute—
Of alle maner of mynystralles,
And gestiours, that tellen tales
Both of wepinge and of game.
Of al that longeth unto Fame.¹

⁴ *Sagenkreis*, p. 71.

⁵ *Gesta Normannorum in Francia ante Rollonem ducem, ab anno Christi DCCCXXXVII ad annum DCCCXCVI: Exempla variorum chronicorum de Danis et Normannis*, in *Historiae Normannorum scriptores antiqui*, ed. A. Duchesne (Paris, 1619), I, 5.

Scriptores rerum Danicarum medii aevi (Hafniae, 1772), II, 8: "Script. Norm. *Sigeberto*, sed paulo infra *Sigefridum* habent."

¹ *Hous of Fame*, ll. 1191–1200. Cf. W. O. Sypherd, *Studies in Chaucer's "Hous of Fame"* ("Chaucer Society," 2d ser., Vol. XXXIX [London, 1907]), pp. 61–63, 104.