

THE KARLAMAGNÚS SAGA VERSION OF THE CHANSON DE BASIN

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The first twenty-five chapters of Part I of *Karlamagnús saga* tell one of the more improbable Charlemagne legends; this is that the King, at the command of an angelic messenger, went on a thieving expedition which served to unmask a conspiracy against his life. His companion on this odd errand was a thief whom the saga, in harmony with all parallel French references, calls "Basin". This tale is also preserved, in whole or in part, in a number of other medieval sources, primarily in Latin, French, Dutch, and German. There are also a number of later folktale versions, in various languages, which testify to widespread oral currency over a number of centuries.

The saga contains the oldest extant version of the legend, although there are two shorter accounts which are roughly contemporary, a brief Latin chronicle entry and a summary in a French poem. The scholars who have paid the most attention to this circumstance over the years have been, naturally enough, those interested in the *chanson de geste*, who have looked to the saga for clues to the content of what is thought of as a lost *Chanson de Basin*, or, as some have preferred to call it, *Chanson de Couronnement de Charlemagne*. The latter title is given because the conspiracy is foiled at the king's coronation in the saga account, and is mentioned as coming immediately afterwards in the earliest French summary account, that found in about twenty lines of *Renaus de Montauban* (ca. 1200). A somewhat later (ca. 1320) French summary is found in the *Restor du Paon*, which says nothing about the timing of the conspiracy; other French references to Basin in *Elie de Saint Gille*, *Jehan de Lanson*, *Auberi le Bourguignon*, *Maugis d'Aigremont*, and the rhymed chronicle of Philippe Mouskès give fewer details.

The most recent analysis of the saga version, by the American Old French scholar Joseph J. Duggan, argues that the source of the saga must have been an assonanced French *chanson de geste*. One of Duggan's principal points is that the saga's council scene, in which Basin plays a major role, conforms to a pattern found in similar scenes in French epic literature, and he finds evidence that the source was assonanced in the particular relics said in this part of the saga to be in the pommel of the sword Durendal. Duggan suggests (following Gaston Paris) that further evidence for the former existence of such a *chanson* is to be found in the record showing a now-lost manuscript catalogued as *Le Romant de Basin* in

the library of the dukes of Burgundy. But this may not have been the same story : the *Romant*, of which brief fragments remain, could have been a later poem detailing the famous thief's further adventures, which is surely the case with *Jehan de Lanson*. It is a curious coincidence that one of the *Romant* fragments, as reported by Duggan, is the line *dist l'emperator, foy que doy saint Simon* ; line 878 of *Jehan de Lanson* reads, *A Allory a dit, "Foy que doy saint Simon"*.

More compelling evidence that there once was such a *chanson* is provided by the mid-thirteenth-century chronicle of Alberic des Trois-Fontaines, whose report has long been known as evidence for the connection of an historical event and the "Basin" legend, although it does not mention a professional thief, much less one named Basin. The event involved was a rebellion or invasion of the Thuringians, a Germanic tribe from beyond the Rhine, under the leadership of one Hardradus in the year 785. However, Sigebert of Gembloux, whose chronicle dates from the end of the eleventh century, assigned this uprising to the year 788 and reported the leader's name as "Hardericus". This is the name given by Alberic, who tells us that by his time there were *cantilena* (the Latin word usually used of *chansons de geste*) about how "Hardericus" led a conspiracy against Charlemagne which was foiled when the king obeyed an angelic command to go out by night and steal.

Of course, such (plural) *cantilena* were likely to have been oral versions with almost unlimited possibilities for variation rather than a relatively stable text. Nor is there any guarantee that they were recited in French. The assumption that there was one particular French version from which all extant written references stem has, however, been commonly made by students of the legend, including those concentrating on the saga, most recently including Povl Skårup, and the German scholar E.L. Wilke, whose book on the German version contains a comparative study of the saga and its principal analogues. These are, aside from the French summaries and more fragmentary references, the German *Karl und Elegast*, a poem composed around 1300, and the far more impressive Middle Dutch *Karel ende Elegast*, thought to have taken its more-or-less final form at around the middle of the fourteenth century. Wilke concludes that the three full length versions are independently derived from a common written source.

This conclusion is supported by several later studies, principally one by the Dutch scholar M.C.A. Brongers, who listed many close correspondences between the saga and the Dutch poem, as well as a number in the German. Brongers identified at least ten passages which show such striking verbal similarities in two or more versions that they almost certainly represent verses translated, or adapted, practically verbatim from such a common source. Wilke's comparison of other accounts to what is said in the German also leads to a strong presumption that *Karl und Elegast* is the version most faithful to the ultimate written

source. This is not surprising in view of the pedestrian nature of the German poem : a second-rate translation, however many blunders it may exhibit, can usually be expected to follow its source more faithfully than one re-shaped by a more inspired artist. In this case, the *Karl und Elegast* clearly mediates between the other versions, frequently seeming to reflect the implications of the scattered references in French sources rather than the idiosyncratic traits of the Dutch masterpiece with which it shares many names and minor details. The name Elegast, substituted for Basin, also appears in the Danish *Karl Magnus Krønike*, a work which is otherwise a faithful abridgement of the saga version. Wilke attributes such points of agreement between the Dutch and German versions, against all French-derived accounts, to a secondary influence of the Dutch poem, which is probably true in the case of the Danish name "Alegast".

But it is possible that "Elegast", or a phrase on which that name was based, was the original designation of the thief, and that it is the name "Basin" which is a later substitution¹. This possibility has emerged only in the last year or so, with a mass of evidence suggesting that the ultimate "original" version of the legend was written in Middle Dutch rather than French. Such are the conclusions of the Dutch scholar A.M. Duinhoven in the second volume of his massive study of *Karel ende Elegast*; Duinhoven's argument is also summarized in a resume which forms the introduction to his new edition of the poem, published in 1982, a few months after the full study appeared. While the validity of his findings will have to be assessed in detail by others who know more about Dutch philology than I do, I find them to be, in general, convincing. There are some details on which I may take exception to his conclusions, but in many cases where my own preliminary observations disagreed with his, I have been persuaded by Duinhoven's evidence, and in others where no one had previously advanced a satisfactory solution to a problem, his analysis offers, at the very least, attractive possibilities.

The most promising key to the manifold contradictions and confusions in the various versions of this legend appears to lie in its distant historical background, especially as this is found in the chronicle of Sigebert, who, as I have remarked, assigns the Hardradus/Hardericus matter to the year 788. But he begins his account of that year with a rather more sensational conspiracy against Charlemagne, one headed by his first cousin Tassilo of Bavaria. While Sigebert gives only a cursory account of this event, certain aspects of it, as reported elsewhere, are in much greater harmony with various details of the "Basin" tale than are any facts connected with the raid of Hardradus, and a conflation of these two "conspiracies", assigned as they were to the same year by Sigebert and later chroniclers, is a likely explanation of the origin of the legend.

That is, in 788 Charlemagne was in residence at Ingelheim, a city on the Rhine near Mainz, from Christmas through the Easter season. It was here, during this period, that Tassilo's conspiracy was thwarted on the day

of a major council of state. The conspiracy described in *Karel ende Elegast* is unmasked at Ingelheim. In the "French" versions (including the saga account), the date is Christmas or Pentecost, both of which figure in the saga. In all versions which give the occasion, a solemn council or state ceremonial is stipulated. And a close kinship between the traitor's wife and Charlemagne is a usual feature of the story: Duinhoven explains this latter circumstance as arising from a misunderstanding of the application of a Dutch term used to describe Tassilo's relationship as "through a sister"; historically, of course, the sister involved was Charlemagne's father's, not his own.

The name of *Karel ende Elegast's* traitor, "Eggeric", is probably derived from Hardericus, via the forms "Arderic"/"Erderic"². As others prior to Duinhoven recognized (see, e.g., Kerstin Schlyter's article), the French equivalent of "Eggeric" would have been "Eggerin", and thus the "Gerin"/"Garin" of extant French accounts. The forms "Hardre"/"Herdri" which might have been expected as direct French derivatives of "Hardradus"/"Hardericus"/"Herderic" do not appear in the French allusions to this conspiracy. Accordingly, Duinhoven argues that the French versions are secondary and derived from a Dutch source in which the chief conspirator was established as "Eggeric"/"Gerin".

However, while there are other impressive grounds for Duinhoven's contention of a Dutch origin, this particular line of reasoning is not as strong as it might be, in light of the fact that "Hardre" does appear as the name of a conspirator foiled by Basin in *Jehan de Lanson*. This is, to be sure, a different and later conspiracy; the earlier "Gerin" conspiracy is also referred to in the poem. But why the name "Hardre" here, the name clearly to have been expected as a French form of the Hardericus of Siebert? A likely explanation for its use here is that both names, "Gerin" and "Hardre", were known to be associated with one or more conspiracies foiled with Basin's aid, and since "Gerin" had become fixed in this area as the name of the original traitor, the alternative form was applied to a second, later, conspirator, according to what we might term the Ganelon Principle: villains and traitors in the *chanson de geste* all seem to be relatives of Ganelon and/or to share certain names peculiar to their kind.

The saga's names for a pair of conspirators, Renfrei and Heldri, reflect a confusion between this legend and one not included in the saga compendium at all; this particular confusion could be expected if the form "Hardre"/"Herdri" was known in French-speaking territory. That is, "Herdri" would surely seem to fall together with the saga's name "Heldri", which is derived from "Heudri", the name of one of a pair of conspirators who are the villains of the *chanson* known as *Mainet*. Thus we get the saga's "Renfrei" from *Mainet's* "Reinfroi".

In *Mainet*, this pair are base-born half-brothers of the true heir, Charles, whom they drive into exile. This gives the young king-to-be opportunity for various adventures under the pseudonym of "Mainet" before

he returns in triumph to oust and punish the usurpers (whereupon, of course, he becomes known as "Carl Mainet"-Charlemagne). Remote as it is, there is also a tenuous historical basis for this romantic legend, only it is not a conspiracy against Charlemagne himself: "Rainfroi" and "Heudri" owe their names to Raginfrid and Chilperic, who rebelled against Charlemagne's grandfather, Charles Martel, about seventy years before the uprising led by Hardradus. Duinhoven asserts that the confusion between Mainet's "Heudri" and the "Hardericus" of the "Basin" legend is unique to the saga account, but there are some notable omissions in the two longest and earliest French summaries which may indicate a similar confusion between these two otherwise quite separate tales.³ *Renaus de Montauban* clearly refers to the downfall of Rainfroi and Heudri in the lines immediately preceding the account of the "Gerin" conspiracy, but their names are not mentioned. And, as Duggan comments, it seems distinctly suspicious that the *Restor du Paon* avoids giving any name at all for its "rice traitor".

The version of the Basin legend found in the saga, then, apparently incorporates elements from three entirely different historical events, conspiracies of one sort or another, against Charlemagne's grandfather, Charles Martell, around 715, and against Charlemagne himself by Hardradus in 785 and by Tassilo in 788. This sort of conflation of distant historical events into one legendary nexus should sound familiar to students of the saga and other medieval literature. The general shape which the legend took in all literary forms can be seen through a comparison of the extant versions, which agree in general insofar as they give the relevant details on what I now perceive as twenty points, which may serve as a summary of the lost original, Duinhoven's *Q*, as follows.⁴

1. An angel addressed Charlemagne three times, ordering him to get up from his bed and steal, or lose his life. Charles was reluctant, but obeyed after the third command.

2. The thief who accompanied Charlemagne was a nobleman in disgrace who had committed an offense against the royal household and had become an outlaw; no common thief, he was well-known to Charlemagne.

3. Charles assumed a cognomen of a kind which described him in a veiled way so that his real name would not come to the wrong ears during the stealing expedition.

4. The raid was made by night.

5. The thief used charms or spells of some sort, especially something to induce sleep, in the course of the raid.

6. The thief was the only one to actually enter the traitor's hall, while Charles waited outside.

7. The thief first took some miscellaneous treasure, then a horse, a saddle, and a sword.

8. The traitor and his wife were in bed when the thief broke in; unaware that he was overheard, the traitor then told his wife the details of

the conspiracy.

9. The traitor expected his wife to keep the secret.
10. There were twelve conspirators in all.
11. The knives to be used were distinctive and sharp, and to be concealed in the conspirators' sleeves.
12. The traitor's wife was a sister of Charlemagne.
13. The traitor's wife lamented for Charles and said, threatening exposure, that her husband deserved to be hanged.
14. Angered by her response, the traitor struck his wife and caused blood to flow from her nose, which the thief, under or beside the bed, caught in his right glove.
15. Charlemagne consulted his councillors on how to avert the conspiracy ; among them was the Duke of Bavaria.
16. As the conspirators entered, each was disarmed by a different member of Charlemagne's retinue.
17. The traitor denied his guilt even when confronted with the evidence.
18. The king condemned the traitors to be hanged.
19. The thief was rewarded with the hand of the traitor's widow and his lands and goods.
20. The conspiracy was timed for, and was unmasked at, a great council of state.

These twenty points, then, are those I think can be confidently assumed to stem from the original version, written, if Duinhoven is correct, in Middle Dutch in the twelfth century. At some time later in this century, a French version must have been circulating, giving rise to the references in various French works. It is obviously probable that this version was composed in Wallonia, adjacent to Dutch-speaking territory ; the place names in the saga cluster in precisely this area. Whether or not it was derived from a Dutch original, the French "Basin" story was evidently characterized by four variants found in the saga and elsewhere : most importantly, the thief's name was Basin. Wilke, who assumed "Elegast" to be a later Dutch innovation copied in Germany and Denmark, suggested that the Dutch poet chose this name to suggest both "unfortunate exile" and "valiant warrior" ; such implications are consonant with the emphases of the Dutch poem, which appears to revise in the direction of elevating Elegast to heroic stature and downplays the less respectable role of "thief", even if the name actually preceded, rather than replaced, that of "Basin", as Duinhoven argues.

Second, in the version we can describe as the *Chanson de Basin*, the night journey of Charles and Basin began at a location in the Ardenne, and its goal was in the Liège-Tongres vicinity. The saga's "Tung" (Tongres) is near Karel ende Elegast's "Eggermonde", understood to be Aigremont, near Liège. Both would be a reasonable night's ride from the vague location in

the Ardenne which is the saga's starting point. The journey in *Karl und Elegast* is from "Urlous", wherever that may be, to "Eckermond" : either the German version has blundered here or the puzzled redactor was deliberately obscuring the locale, for *Karel ende Elegast's* Ingelheim (presumably dictated by echoes of the historical events of 785 conflated with 788) is much too far from Aigremont for a one-night's journey, let alone the return trip described in all relevant versions. But the attack of Hardericus (Hardradus) came from Germany, over the Rhine from Ingelheim ; Duinhoven's suggestion that at some early point in the textual history of the original someone misread *tegermanie* as *teggermonde* points to Aigremont, not Ingelheim, as the mistaken reading.

A French redactor from Wallonia would have known Ingelheim to be much too far from Aigremont, and it would have been logical for such a redactor to retain Aigremont but to move the starting point of the expedition to the nearby Ardenne. It so happens that this change of scene locates the story in the area where Chilperic and Raginfrid were finally defeated and slain, which may provide further reason for a degree of confusion arising between "Hardericus" and Chilperic/Heudri/Heldri.

A third possible characteristic of the *Chanson de Basin* is that the conspiracy took place at or about the time of Charlemagne's coronation, as appears from the evidence of the saga and *Renaus de Montauban*. This is probably not a feature of the common original, since *Karl und Elegast*, like *Karel ende Elegast* and such "historical" accounts as that of Alberic, places this event long after Charlemagne's accession to the throne.

The *Karlamagnús saga* account, then, falls firmly into the *Chanson de Basin* group, and is supported by one or another of the French accounts in all these variants. But it has certain marked differences from all other versions which make it unlikely that it represents the *Chanson de Basin* version accurately or directly. As Povl Skårup points out in his important study of the saga in the new Danish edition of four of its ten parts, most informed opinion today agrees that Part I of the saga was based on an intermediary version, almost undoubtedly of Anglo-Norman provenance. This was probably the compilation based on a number of originally independent *chansons de geste* proposed by Gustav Storm in 1874 and called the *Vie romancée de Charlemagne* by the late Paul Aebischer. Variants peculiar to the saga may, then, be characteristics of that intermediary compilation rather than innovations of the thirteenth-century Norwegian translation. But it remains that the saga is what we have, and its account constitutes an interesting and significantly chosen (or revised) introduction to what is, in fact, the only reasonably complete Charlemagne cycle extant.⁵

Many differences in the saga version are simply modifications, for one reason or another, of the agreements already detailed as stemming from the original version of the story. Before I describe these variations, however, I must hastily set the record straight on one non-variation : I

remarked, as the fifth point of agreement, that the thief used charms or spells of some sort. Unfortunately, my translation of Part I as published obscured the presence of such a spell in the saga. I should have given "Basin... brought it about, through his wiles, that everyone in the hall was asleep", rather than "Basin... was able to tell, in his shrewdness, that..." My alternate, and erroneous, interpretation of the key phrase was chosen because I had been misled by others who claimed that there was no trace of "enchantment" in the saga ; in turn, I fear I misled Duinhoven, to whom I owe apologies.⁶

An example of a significant variant is the angel's three-part message. In the Dutch and German poems, the angel repeats, three times, what is essentially the same command, although there is some variation in the Dutch, and the king shows marked reluctance the first two times. In the saga the message is divided into two installments, given on separate nights. Karl is first told to flee to friends because his life is in danger, a command which he obeys immediately. The next night, the angel gives a two-part command to get up and steal. While the king feels puzzlement at the first part of this message, he obeys as soon as the angel adds the second part. It is still a three-part message, containing the same warning and order, but the arrangement makes a very real difference : Karl obeys the first order, to flee to the protection of friends because his life is in danger, at once, not showing any of the skepticism of the older Charlemagne of the Dutch and German poems ; thus the saga's Karl demonstrates both that he has loyal adherents and that his obedience to angelic commands is immediate and unquestioning.

Further, his hesitation at accepting the strange order to go and steal, a hesitation which is stated at some length and repeated twice in the Dutch and German poems, is, in the saga, a mere momentary puzzlement as to how to go about such an errand. Thus the future emperor is shown to be God-fearing and upright, as well as prudent and blessed with loyal friends, from the first lines of the saga. This emphasis sets the tone for the reverent and admiring treatment of Karl's character in all sections of *Karlamagnús saga*, which generally avoids hints of the arbitrary Charlemagne of the "rebellious barons" group of *chansons de geste*.

Next, in the saga alone the angel specifically names "Basin the thief" and tells Karl to take him along, where in the "Elegast" versions the king simply happens to meet an outlaw he recognizes as a duke he has exiled. The saga version not only eliminates any culpability on the part of its hero for the thief's condition but also makes it possible for the thief to be summoned to the king and make a profession of loyalty to him then and there. This contributes to our sense of the king's dignity and ability to inspire loyalty and reverence in his subjects, in this case the subject being definitely not among his personal friends and allies up to this moment.

The saga does not state that the thief had previously held high rank, but this is surely suggested by various details here : that the king knew who

Basin was must be understood, since he sends for him without delay. Upon his entry, Basin makes a submission of a kind which might be expected from a man of rank, and is hereafter treated as an equal among Karl's barons ; he is eventually rewarded with the high-ranking traitor's widow and goods, which would seem an entirely excessive reward for a common thief. The saga also omits any mention of kinship between the king and the traitor's wife, but this must be because the traitor there is Renfrei, who would probably have been known to be the king's half-brother and thus ineligible as a husband to his sister.

The most significant variant passages, however, come during the robbery scene. In other versions, the thief enters the traitor's house alone, making only one expedition. In the course of this he overhears the conversation about the conspiracy, and then brings back the wife's blood to the king, who remains outside. In the saga, when Basin has returned from an initial raid Karl insists on going in himself ; Basin accompanies him, but the king himself overhears the conversation and preserves the wife's blood as proof. This action makes Karl far more active and heroic himself , of course. It also makes possible the grand finale of the scene, which reinforces all the effect of the previous variants : when Basin attempts to steal the traitor's horse, it will not obey him, but is instantly calmed by the king's touch and stands as if rooted to the ground while he saddles and mounts it. Then, as he rides out of the hall, the traitor's wife awakes and sees a great light in the hall. As I explained in a note, this is probably an aureole signifying Charlemagne's royalty.

There are a number of details in the account of the exposure of the conspiracy in which the saga is also alone, but many of them were certainly changes made in order to tie this narrative together with a number of other previously unrelated episodes into one continuous plot. Thus, for example, we are introduced to Karl's two sisters, both of whom have important parts to play in later sequences of Part I. And, while the linkage of the coronation with the unmasking of the conspiracy was probably found in the independent *Chanson de Basin*, the scene in which Karl is confirmed under the new name of Karlamagnus is an embellishment which might have been brought into the story at almost any stage of its development in a version which gives his cognomen as anything like "Magnus" (or "Mainet"). These and other variants in the saga version are of little importance in comparison with the unique emphases of the first two chapters, which serve to introduce the primary hero of *Karlamagnús saga* as indeed a hero in his own right.

The figure thus established here is a good deal stronger than that of Arthur in comparable Arthurian compendia, and very unlike the rather passive Karel of *Karel ende Elegast*, a poem which glorifies the thief at the expense of the king. But the noble, pious, courageous, and justly loved Karlamagnus we meet at the beginning of the saga is a key to the intentions of the saga as a whole. Even in the jocular "Journey to

Jerusalem" section (Part VII), Charlemagne is treated with far more reverence and respect than in any analogue. And in that case, we can be quite sure that the shift in tone is the work of the translator or compiler, since we have a French analogue which is remarkably, and unusually, close to the source.

It would appear, then, that to appreciate the nature and intended effect of the *Karlamagnús saga* version of the tale of Basin, we must consider two contexts: the context of its analogues and that of the saga as a whole.

NOTES

- 1 Duinhoven (see below) derives "Basin" as follows : original *een gast* "a stranger", written as *eē gast*, was read as *elegast* and assumed to be a personal name ; the *g* would have dropped out in French, giving *eliast* ; this could have been misread as (e) *basī* "and Basin". This may seem dubious to others ; for one thing, any reading of *en*, however written, as *el*, would be a very unusual blunder. I suggested an alternative explanation of "Elegast" in a review-article published in 1978 ; at that time I had not read Wilke's proposals on this subject, which are along the same lines as my own but go a good deal further.
- 2 Presumably through association with the place name "Eggermonde" : on the place name itself, see below.
- 3 For a full discussion of *Mainet* and its lack of true overlap with the "Basin" legend, see the book of Jacques Horrent listed under "References".
- 4 A fuller account of the sources of these points will appear in my forthcoming article "Reconstructing the Lost *Chanson de Basin* : was it a *Couronnement de Charlemagne* ?" to be published in *The Romance Epic*, ed. Hans-Erich Keller.
- 5 The only comparable "cycle" versions are the Pseudo-Turpin chronicle and a group in Welsh ; but this material and a great deal more is all included in the saga.
- 6 This is not the only reference to Basin's sorcery in the saga ; see my translation of Part I, p. 66.

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