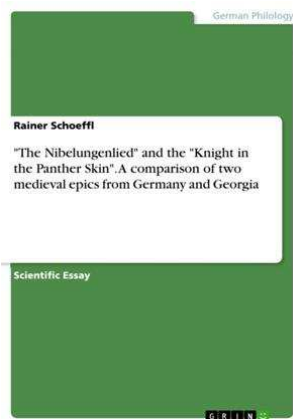


The Nibelungenlied and The Man in the Panther Skin: A Comparison of Two Medieval Epics

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Abstract: The present paper refers to the most important epics of the High Middle Ages in Germany and Georgia: *The Nibelungenlied* (NL) and *The Man in the Panther Skin* (MPS). Both poems were composed around the year 1200 in very similar social environments (feudal system, court life, chivalry, Christianity), and both were unique secular poetries in those days.

A comparison of their characteristics seems therefore appropriate.

Key words: “*The Nibelungenlied*”, “*The Man in the Panther Skin*”, *medieval literature*

Plot: Both poems can be divided into two parts of approximately equal length.

In the NL, these two parts are often named *Siegfried's death* and *Kriemhild's revenge*. The first part recounts the wooing of Kriemhild by the hero Siegfried, their eventual marriage and his treacherous homicide. The second part tells of a second wooing of Kriemhild, this time by the widowed Hun king Etzel (Attila), their marriage and Kriemhild's ultimate revenge on the Burgundians for Siegfried's murder. *The Klage* (the lament), a poem written a couple of years after the NL, can be considered an accompanying commentary of the NL and describes the aftermath of the carnage at the Hun court.

If one considers the NL as story of the Burgundian downfall, then the plot of the NL develops straight forward until the disaster. The poem consists of approx. 2350 stanzas.

The two parts of the MPS consist of two quests of the hero Avtandil, and they are the framework for the story of Tariel. The first quest tells of Avtandil's search for Tariel, the man in the

panther skin. The second one describes the search for Nestan-Darejan and finally her rescue together with Tariel. The poem ends with a double wedding of Avtandil to Tinatin, and Tariel to Nestan-Darejan.

The MPS is a highly interlaced story of Tariel's win, loss, and retrieval of his bride, and their eventual marriage.

The poem consists of approx. 1600 stanzas.

Literary genre: It is rather difficult to determine the genre which both epics belong to since they are unique for the period when they were created, and both "are in a transition phase from heroic poetry to romance" [4, p. 546f.], which applies more for the MPS than for the NL.

The main protagonists of the NL, Siegfried, King Gunther and Hagen, do not show real courtly or chivalric behavior. Therefore, Ursula Schulze [16, pp. 104-112] calls the NL simply "epic" without any additional adjunct. But it should be considered that the NL includes extensive descriptions of the courtly life with vassals, servants, banquets, jewelry, and fine clothes. This is like a mirror of feudal life. By contrast, Cecil Bowra claims that there are enough romantic elements for considering the NL a "mixture of heroic and romantic elements" [4, p. 547]. However, there are in fact only few romantic elements in the NL. Finally the NL is named sometimes "heroic epic", which depends after all on the definition for "heroic". Stephen L. Wailes provides an adequate definition: "Heroism is defined as the exemplary behavior of prominent persons. It is important to understand that this is not limited to consideration of admirable or laudable actions, those viewed by the audience with favor, which are associated with the general usage of terms such as 'hero' and 'heroism'." [19, p. 123]

Under consideration of all above aspects the NL may be characterized as *heroic feudal epic*.

For the MPS a lot of definitions for its genre can be found. Gigi Tevzadze [17, p. 1] locates the MPS somewhere between the *Shahnameh* and the *Song of Roland (Le Chanson de Roland)*. The translator Marjory Wardrop [20] uses the subtitle „romantic epic“ on her book, and Helmut Birkhan believes that the MPS is "more novel than epic" [3, p. 145]. Maka Elbakidze lists in his paper [6] nine different definitions for the literary genre of the MPS but concludes that the MPS "is not a typical specimen of medieval romance of chivalry".

Since Rustaveli has composed his poem in singable rhymed stanzas, the term "epic" is more appropriate than "novel" or "romance". The best definition may be *romantic chivalric epic*.

Metre: The NL consists of quatrains but the lines rhyme in pairs with a caesura in the middle. This stanzaic form distinguishes the NL from almost all German medieval narrative verses, the normal metre of which is the short rhyming couplet as applied for the *The Klage* [see 10, pp. 16f.]. The first stanza of manuscript B is provided as example:

*Uns ist in alten maeren wonders vil geseit
von helden lobebaeren, von grozer arebeit,*

*von fröuden, hochgeziten, von weinen und von
klagen,
von küener recken striten muget ir nu wunder hoeren
sagen.*

George Needler has translated the Middle High German text into English, using the NL metre [12, verse 1]:

*To us in olden story are wonders many told
Of heroes rich in glory, of trials manifold:
Of joy and festive greeting, of weeping and of woe,
Of keenest warriors meeting, shall ye now many a wonder
know.*

The MPS also is written in quatrains but with rhyming lines of sixteen syllables, named “shairi”. Lyn Coffin’s translation uses the shairi form as demonstrated with the following stanza [5, verse 89]:

He sent a slave to speak to the knight, whose heart was stricken
with woe,
Who with downcast head was weeping, and it was clearly not for
show.
From the jets of his eyelashes, clear waters could be seen to flow.
The slave approached, but could not speak to a knight who was
weeping so.

The similarity of the metres is not unusual because “epics of the sort of MPS and NL are composed in singable stanzas. This is characteristic for medieval poems which were performed by some kind of singing voice” [cf. 11, p. 2].

The Austrian Eberhard Kummer conducted extensive studies on the singability of the NL until he started to sing it. The accompanying instruments which he is using are the lap harp and the wheel fiddle. Eberhard Kummer has already performed the NL in Middle High German in its entirety several times, singing each time five days with six hours each day.

The MPS could have been sung to the „Davidic“ harp, which may have come to the Caucasus with the Jews of the Babylonian captivity [20, p. IX].

Literacy: The communication in the NL is based on verbal messages. Ahead the war of the Burgundians with the Danish and the Saxons verbal messages are exchanged, and Etzel’s courting of Kriemhild is performed by the matchmaker Rüdiger von Bechelaren. Only one exception can be found in the NL, when Etzel invites the Burgundians to his court. The messengers had a letter with them as we can read in the poem: “Letters and kindly greeting, now to them they give” [12, verse 1421]. This fact leads to the assumption that the NL was composed mainly for an illiterate society.

The communication in the MPS is completely different. A lot of letters pass continuously between all acting persons or groups in the poem. Among the sixty-three chapters (prologue and epilogue not included) of Lyn Coffin’s MPS translation are fourteen headlines referring to a letter. Some are e.g. love letters between

Tariel and his beloved, or letters between Tariel and the Khatavians. Helmut Birkhan [3, p. 146] comments this circumstance with the following words: "In contrast to our heroic epic [he means the NL, A/N] Rustaveli's poem is addressed to a mostly literate society for which a frequent exchange of letters sounds plausibly." This could be an indication that the literacy in Georgia around 1200 was further advanced than in the today's German-speaking countries.

Demeanor: The demeanor of the acting persons is completely different between the NL and the MPS: The protagonists of the MPS exhibit excessive outbursts of emotion with some kind of artificiality. They cry in 16% of all stanzas, and sometimes they even weep bloody tears. A similar behavior cannot be found in the NL but only in the *Klage* where the heroes moan during 40% of the poem.

Loyalty and friendship: The common general orientation of both epics is loyalty and friendship. The Middle High German word "triuwe", the fundamental theme of the NL, means "unswerving personal loyalty and devotion, which manifests itself above all in the characters of Kriemhild and Hagen" [12, p. XXVI]. Kriemhild holds faith with Siegfried beyond his death which is finally the motivation for her revenge on Hagen. Hagen's absolute loyalty towards Brunhild results in the homicide of Siegfried, and the Burgundian kings place their loyalty to Hagen above their obligations to their sister, leading to disaster and the complete destruction of the Nibelungs. Verse 2105 from manuscript B reads in this respect [2]:

"Nune welle got von himele", sprach do Gernot.
"ob unser tusedt waeren, wir laegen alle tot,
der sippen diner mage, e wir dir einen man
gaeben hie ze gisel: ez wird et nimmer getan."

This verse reads in English prose translation as follows:

"God in heaven forbid!" cried Gernot. "Though we were a thousand, gladly would we all die by your kinsmen, than give one single man for our ransom. That we will never do." [cf. 1, p. 209]

With respect to the MPS we find in Marjory Wardrop's translation [20, p. VI]: "The poem is a glorification of friendship [...] even the gratification of the tenderest love must be postponed to this high duty." Wardrop hints with these words at Avtandil who does not stay with his beloved Tinatin after his first quest but leaves her again in order to help his sworn brother Tariel. And it is interesting to see that even Tinatin agrees with Avtandil with following words:

"I believe that you did well not to break the oath that you
did swear.
One should manifest strong love for a friend, even one
that's not there,
To uncover the mystery, seek for his cures as best you
dare.
But if the sun in my Heaven's hidden, I'm sure to feel
despair!" [5, verse 711]

Ending of the stories: The MPS ends with the “Happy End” of the weddings of Avtandil and Tariel to their ladies while the NL sinks into blood and total chaos. Only the *Klage* has a propitiatory ending with the coronation of Gunther’s and Brunhild’s son to the new king of the Burgundians.

Historical relations: They are very vague in both poems and are more distinct in the NL with the characters of the Burgundian kings and the king of the Huns, Attila (Etzel), and, limited, with Dietrich von Bern (= Theoderic the Great). The only historical relation in the MPS may be the coronation of Tinatin which can be regarded as synonym of the coronation of Queen Tamar. The reigning kings – Rostevan in the MPS and Giorgi III. of Georgia - have in both cases no male successor that is why they appointed their daughters as co-regent and future sole ruler.

“The showplaces of the MPS are sort of a map of fantasy” [13, p. 464], except the country designations “Arabia”, “India”, and “Khatay”. In contrast all locations of the NL can be rediscovered on actual maps of Germany, Austria, and Hungary. Although some names have changed after the NL was composed, they can be identified [15, pp. 82 – 91].

The lack of historical relations and sources in the MPS can be explained by the fact that the MPS is not derived from folk tales and sagas, but just the opposite is the case: Georgian folk tales and sagas are derived from the MPS [cf. 8].

Folk wisdom: Rustaveli is unsurpassed for his metaphors and aphorisms, and some have found their way from the MPS into the language of Georgian people. One famous example is “The lion’s whelps are equal, be they male or female” [20, verse 39]. Pavlé Ingorokva [8, p. XLVIII] recites additional verses adopted by people during “historical times of difficulty” (the figures in brackets are the No. of the verses in Marjory Wardrop’s edition):

“A friend should spare himself no trouble for his friend’s sake, he should give heart for heart, love as a road and a bridge.” (685)

“Better a glorious death than shameful life.” (781)

“In grief one should strengthen himself like a stone wall.” (855)

More examples of aphoristic speech in the MPS can be found in [9].

The NL has no metaphors or aphorisms. This may be the reason that German ordinary language does not make use of quotations from the NL. But there are two popular phrases relating to the NL. One reads “Dolchstoß in den Rücken” (stab in one’s back). This term was created after World War I and refers to Siegfried’s assassination by Hagen from behind. Nowadays the phrase is used in Germany if someone wants to accuse somebody of an underhanded deed.

Another German phrase is “Nibelungentreue” (Nibelung loyalty), expressing an absolute, unquestioning, excessive and potentially disastrous loyalty to somebody. This phrase refers to the NL where the Burgundian kings refuse to hand over to Kriemhild their loyal vassal and murder of Siegfried, Hagen, leading to the complete destruction of the Burgundians/Nibelungs.

National epic: The precondition for a poem to become a national epic depends on the definition of “national epic”. There is one definition among others which applies to both the NL and the MPS: “Heroic epic, which plays an important role in the awareness or educational canon of a nation [...] because it seems that the national characteristic is marked clearly” [18]. This definition offers a large variety of interpretations. German scholars believed that the heroes of the NL picture typical German features, whilst Georgian people recognize the MPS as reflection of their soul. This is why Marjory Wardrop says that the MPS is “[...] a book which is the mirror of the soul of a cultured people with great past” [20, p. iii]. The MPS was conserved in the awareness of the people during centuries and was passed on both orally and by writing. It has been virtually part of the Georgian people and became with good reason its national epic. This evolution was supported by the royal court, and the aristocracy.

In contrast to the MPS, the NL vanished into oblivion for almost three centuries until its first edition in Modern High German 1807. It was then elevated to German national epic by scholars and later on by politicians only in their belief that this poem reflects German character such as defined by Friedrich Heinrich von der Hagen [7, n.p.]: loyalty and friendship till death, generosity, daring, and superhuman bravery, among others. The national ideology of the Nazi regime was based on the NL, and it is hardly surprising that present-day German people cannot identify themselves with such definition and hence with a national epic being based on it. However, some people still call it “national epic”, and the German philologist Friedrich Panzer argues: “National epic is the one epic which is perceived and admitted by the nation concerned” [14, p. 468].

Memory of the World: Both epics belong to the UNESCO Memory of the World Register, the NL since 2009 with the main manuscripts A, B, and C. It was decided by UNESCO on the following reasons:

The Nibelungenlied (the Song of the Nibelungs) is probably the most famous heroic poem in Middle High German. It is comparable with other world-famous epics such as the epic of Gilgamesh of Ancient Babylonia, the Mahabharata of Ancient India, or the Heike Monogatari in medieval Japan. It tells the story of 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.

Currently, 36 manuscripts of the NL are known, among them 11 complete codices. All the rest are fragments. Manuscripts of the 13th and 14th century (written on parchment) are distinguished by capitals, those of the 15th and 16th century (mainly written on paper) received small letters. It is assumed that the three main manuscripts A, B and C, rewritten between 1230 and 1280, are based directly on the unknown original. All other manuscripts are derived from A, B or C.

The MPS was included in the UNESCO Memory of the World Register in 2013 under the title *Knight in the Panther's Skin*. It incorporates a collection of 96 manuscripts and early printings (94 in Georgia, 2 in England).

This collection consists of a mixture of Georgian, oriental and European cultural traditions created during major political, socio-economic and cultural changes throughout the Caucasian and Middle East regions. It provides unique information about the lifestyle, traditions and characterizations of different social groups in the Middle Ages from the royal family to merchants and peasants. It can also be characterized as the peak of development of neo-Platonic thinking and a hymn of human nature, friendship, love, equality and struggle for freedom.

The nominated collection added to the UNESCO Memory of the World Register is only part of a total of 164 survived manuscripts rewritten in the 17th century and after. Some of them are entire, some exist only in fragments. The oldest manuscript dates back to 1646.

The reason for nominating only three manuscripts of the NL but ninety-six manuscripts of the MPS for the UNESCO Memory of the World Register is that the MPS is represented by a collection whilst the NL is represented by the three individual main manuscripts from the 13th century.

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