

EREC

by
HARTMANN VON AUE



Translated, with an introduction and commentary, by
MICHAEL RESLER



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CAROLO MAGNO

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INTRODUCTION

INTRODUCTION

HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL BACKGROUND

At Pentecost in the year 1184 the Holy Roman Emperor Friedrich I—known as Friedrich Barbarossa—hosted a great festival along the banks of the Rhein at Mainz to celebrate the knighting of his two sons Heinrich and Friedrich.¹ A graphic documentation of the splendor and pageantry of this remarkable *Hoftag* (or imperial gathering) can be found in the Latin *Chronicle of Henne-gaus*,² which was written twelve years later—in 1196—by Gislebert of Mons, one of the participants at Mainz. Gislebert reports that the festival was attended by some 70,000 knights and by hundreds of bishops, archbishops, princes, dukes and counts; in addition, we know from other sources³ that a number of important poets journeyed to Mainz as well. Over the course of three days' time, Gislebert discloses, enormous stores of food and drink were provided the participants, along with entertainment and knightly tournaments. Indeed, Barbarossa erected on this site what appeared to be a veritable city of tents and pavilions to house the throngs which came to Mainz to take part in the festivities.⁴ Not only in the view of many modern historians, but already in the minds of contemporary, twelfth-century chroniclers,⁵ the emperor's *Hoftag* came to epitomize most succinctly the coming of the chivalric age to Germany. In Barbarossa's time, for instance, the 1184 festival was already being hailed as an extraordinary event⁶ and as an external expression of the alliance of the emperor and the knights.⁷

So spectacular, in fact, was this assembly that it was recorded not only by historians, but was also treated—indeed, raised virtually to the level of myth—by numerous poets. For example, the Frenchman Guiot de Provins, himself in attendance at the festival, consciously alludes to the parallels between this chivalric spectacle at Mainz and the celebrated pageants hosted by Alexander the Great and by King Arthur.⁸ One of the German poets present, Heinrich von Veldeke, in his romance *Eneit*, reports of Virgil's wedding feast for Lavinia and Aeneas, and likens this event to the great spectacle at Mainz: "I never heard of

such a festival, unless it was that at Mainz, when Kaiser Frederick knighted his sons."⁹ Hence, by the late twelfth century in Germany, both history and literature seem to have intersected in a common fascination with knighthood.

At virtually the same time as Barbarossa's *Hoftag*—farther to the south of Mainz, somewhere in present-day Swabia—yet another German poet by the name of Hartmann von Aue was composing in the Middle High German language the story of Erec, a member of King Arthur's fellowship of the Round Table. Although the rich pageantry of the Arthurian world had by this time already gained great popularity in France, Hartmann's romance was the very first account in the German tongue of the adventures of an Arthurian knight. Far from being an isolated or ephemeral literary phenomenon, the tale of Erec's quest for knightly fulfillment was to launch a new and immensely popular form of literature within Germany. Following directly in Hartmann's footsteps, the next several generations of German-speaking poets would draw frequently upon the colorful Arthurian mythology in their works.

Scholars generally believe that Hartmann's *Erec* was composed around the year 1185, give or take perhaps a half decade. This would make *Erec* almost exactly contemporaneous with the fabled events at Mainz. To be sure, we possess no evidence whatsoever to suggest that Hartmann was among the poets in attendance at the festival in Mainz, or even that this festival, in any direct way, occasioned Hartmann to write *Erec*. Yet these two phenomena of late twelfth-century Germany—one of them a literary fiction and the other a historical fact—have one very important thread in common: the primacy of knighthood. In a real sense, the chivalric ethic, which had rapidly overspread large parts of Europe during the eleventh and twelfth centuries and which seems to have taken on such palpable form in the celebration at Mainz, provided the cultural soil in which the works of Hartmann von Aue and his fellow Arthurian poets would soon take root and come to full blossom. To a great extent, the seeds of new literature in Germany were nurtured by the larger cultural and political forces—most especially the rise of knighthood—that were shaping life in Western Europe.

A major factor in the development of the chivalric order during the eleventh and twelfth centuries was the advent of the Crusades. Indeed, it was during the age of the Crusades that knighthood reached its zenith. A long series of wars waged by European Christians between the eleventh and fourteenth centuries, the Crusades promoted the development of a new order of fighters, the knights. Through the deployment of large armies of warriors in the Middle East, the Crusaders hoped—first and foremost—to recapture the Holy Land by force from the Muslims. Full absolution was promised to all who took up the

cross to that end, and the mobilization of a fighting force was undertaken on a grand scale. Knighthood and the Church, the two mainstays of medieval Europe, were, at least on the surface and for a limited time, united in one common cause.

To be sure, the Church's attitude towards much of what constituted chivalry had been, prior to the Crusades, lukewarm. The Church, the preponderant social institution in medieval Christendom, continued throughout the high Middle Ages to proscribe such knightly activities as jousting.¹⁰ On the other hand, a certain ecclesiastical ambivalence towards warfare was fundamentally ingrained in the medieval Church, for the bellicose streak rooted in the militant God of the Old Testament had long been intermingled with the predominantly pacific ethos of the New Testament.¹¹ At any rate, this tension within the Church between war and peace was sufficiently palpable to preclude any sort of wholehearted ecclesiastical embracing of the ideals of knighthood. However, a major shift in this attitude, which parallels the development of chivalry as a Christian calling,¹² came with the age of the Crusades. Now the Church began to preach the Crusading effort as a "positive transformation of the knightly way of life."¹³

An intriguing footnote to the interrelationships among chivalry, the Crusades, and the Church can be interposed if we return once more to Mainz and to Emperor Friedrich I. It is interesting to note that at the 1184 chivalric pageant at Mainz, the notion of the Crusade, although it had already contributed so much to the rise of chivalry, appears not to have been a motivating concern. Four years later, however, in 1188, Emperor Friedrich once again assembled a great host at Mainz—this time for the express purpose of taking up the cross and embarking upon the coming Crusade. Finally, now that the Crusading fervor had found full resonance at the imperial court, the Church would grant its full approval, indeed its blessing. The Church, which had remained largely in the background in 1184, now joined the constellation—formalized four years earlier—of emperor, knights and poets.¹⁴ This second great festival at Mainz was no longer a vainglorious, self-indulgent, secular exercise, but rather a part of the concerted effort to retake the Holy Land. On the surface, at least, the *militia imperatoris* had now become the *militia Christi*.¹⁵

Seen from a strictly historical standpoint, the Crusades were ultimately unsuccessful. For one thing, individual motives for taking up the cross were—probably from the outset—very much mixed, the pursuit of worldly honor figuring strongly alongside the outwardly expressed religious priorities. In fact, the emperor himself was convinced that he was fighting "tam pro Deo quam pro honore temporali."¹⁶ Furthermore, the Crusades, with their grandiose aim of capturing the Holy Land, may well have been, from a purely practical stance,

unrealistic and thus doomed from the outset. By the twelfth century a certain disillusionment had already begun to set in.

Disenchantment with the Crusading movement may in some ways have been linked to the fact that the Church, far from being a monolithic institution acting with the full and unanimous consent of its many and diverse arms, was, during much of this period, torn by new currents of theology and by numerous heretical movements, most significantly in Southern France and in Northern Italy. By the late twelfth century, ever greater numbers of thinkers were beginning to pursue new religious practices and to embrace diverse moral values. Indeed, it is difficult to understand or to appreciate this age by looking for common denominators or universally held beliefs, for "it was the variety, not the reconciliation, which struck deepest root in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries."¹⁷ In the broadest sense, the unity of purpose necessary for so huge an undertaking as the Crusades seems to have been lacking.

Yet whatever the reasons for their failure, the impact of the Crusades on medieval European civilization for long after the Middle Ages was profound, indeed virtually incalculable.¹⁸ First of all, the Crusades served to stimulate trade and commerce. Along with this, new and exotic-sounding names came into the European languages to describe the various spices, fabrics, and medicines that were being brought back from the Middle East. The Crusades also served as the catalyst for a great cross-fertilization among European and Eastern institutions and nations. There began a broad influx of new ways of thinking into Western Europe.

On a lesser scale, this great intermingling of people and ideas caused by the Crusades helped to spark the literary growth experienced by the German tongue during the final years of the twelfth and the early decades of the thirteenth century. For not only merchants and the Crusading *milites Dei* journeyed to the Holy Land: poets and thinkers went as well. Among the important German-speaking poets of this age many (perhaps most) are thought to have been knights,¹⁹ and certain of them—including, as we shall see, Hartmann von Aue himself—actually took part in the Crusades.

The Crusading experience supplied the subject matter for some of the literature composed in the Middle High German language, in particular portions of the song poetry. However, of far greater import for the literature was the newly enhanced role of knighthood. Whether or not the individual German poets actually left home to take up the cross and journey across the Mediterranean (and some apparently did), the important fact remains that many of these tellers of adventurous tales were first and foremost knight-poets. As such, their stories are thoroughly steeped in the ideals of chivalry, which was the driving

force in Middle High German literature in the decades surrounding the year 1200.

While this period marked the first great literary age in the German tongue, it was not the first time that German culture, in the broader sense, had flourished. The late eighth and early ninth centuries had already witnessed—during the Carolingian renaissance—lofty cultural achievements on German soil. However, the chief literary and official language of Charlemagne's court was Latin, and not German. The vernacular was at that time not yet deemed a serious vehicle for the linguistic needs of the court.

By the late twelfth century, however—by the time of Hartmann von Aue—German had acquired significantly higher status as a literary language.²⁰ Perhaps the earliest memorable literary work of this period to resonate fully with the timbre of its age was the *Rolandslied*, an epic dating from around 1170 (at least a full decade before Hartmann's *Erec*). Ostensibly, the *Rolandslied* was composed as a retelling of the deeds of Charlemagne and his adjutant Roland in their battle against the Saracens, which had taken place four centuries earlier in Spain. It was no accident, however, that the recounting of this and other tales from the distant past came at the very time when the battle had just been resumed in the Holy Land against the same opponent. And insofar as the Church was the chief promoter of the Crusades, it is noteworthy that the *Rolandslied* was written by a priest of the Church, Konrad of Regensburg. Finally, given the need for at least some degree of popular support for the Crusading effort, it is significant that Konrad composed his work in German, and not in Latin, which—albeit the sole written language widely understood throughout the European Middle Ages—was chiefly learned and used only by the educated ruling classes.

To be sure, the ethos of the *Rolandslied* was still a half generation or more removed from that of the more refined courtly literature of Heinrich von Veldeke and Hartmann von Aue, for the *Rolandslied* still rings with the earlier barbaric conviction that the heathen masses are little more than cattle for the slaughter.²¹ A more enlightened, tolerant attitude towards non-Christians would not fully find its way into the literature for another several decades, with Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Willehalm* (ca. 1215–20). Nonetheless, with the composition of the *Rolandslied*, the notion that the Crusade was "the adventure of the hour,"²² regardless of individual motives or dogmatic preconceptions, had now taken on popular literary expression.

Within the literature of the Middle High German age—a period which followed close on the heels of the *Rolandslied*—the courtly romance and the heroic epic were the most important narrative genres. Above all else, the poets of

these romances and epics (along with the earlier *Rolandslied* poet) clearly relished recounting the valorous deeds of a strong heroic central figure. The wondrous feats of Siegfried in the *Nibelungenlied* or the long and arduous quest by Parzival for the Holy Grail are but two examples of the propensity to glorify and mythologize the actions of a larger-than-life hero.

In this same vein, the literature can be seen as a mirror of its times. Great ages in history are marked by great leaders, and there was no shortage of imposing historical figures in Europe around 1200. This was the age of Saint Francis of Assisi and of Richard the Lion-Heart, of powerful popes and renowned kings. Within Germany itself, the Hohenstaufen family produced a dynastic line of Holy Roman emperors whose rule coincided with the very peak of Europe's knightly glory.

Emperor Friedrich I (ca. 1125–1190) was the most famous of the Hohenstaufen rulers. As we have seen, not only did Barbarossa encourage and foster Crusading, he took part in the Third Crusade and drowned in the year 1190 in Cilicia (in Asia Minor) while embarking upon this effort. Moreover, Friedrich I was an important patron of literature as well. In fact, one of the poets present at the 1184 *Hoftag* in Mainz, Guiot de Provins, expressly names Friedrich Barbarossa as his patron. Yet another French poet, Raimon Vidal, comments in one of his works that the emperor did much to encourage the poetry of the troubadours.²³ The German poet Friedrich von Hausen, who composed Crusading songs while in the company of Friedrich Barbarossa on the Third Crusade, is also named in certain documents as the *secretarius* and *familiaris*²⁴ of the emperor. It is possible that Friedrich's wife, the Empress Beatrix, whose ties to literature can be traced back as far as 1167, may have moved her husband to grant a willing ear to poetry.²⁵ At any rate, it is abundantly clear that poets were made to feel welcome at the imperial court and that the emperor's bonds with men of letters were quite strong.

While Friedrich Barbarossa was a dominant figure in European politics, it was his grandson, Friedrich II (1194–1250), who was perhaps the most brilliant member of the Hohenstaufen family. As a ruler, Friedrich II was, in the final analysis, flawed, for he was unable to halt the forces which ultimately brought down the Hohenstaufen dynasty. But like his grandfather and like numerous other political figures of the day (most notably Landgrave Hermann of Thuringia and the Babenberg dukes of Vienna), the younger Friedrich was a patron of art and poetry. Without such patronage it is questionable whether much of the great literature of the period would have been preserved for later generations, or indeed whether it would have been composed at all. Not only were the poets offered encouragement (in the form of commissions) and the

necessary material conditions for writing, the wealthier patrons also saw to it that the tales and lyrics were permanently recorded in sometimes very costly and precious manuscripts. The role of the patrons was undoubtedly pivotal in passing on to us much of what we possess of the literary legacy of the Middle High German age.

While secular rulers such as the two Friedrichs left an indelible mark upon life and literature during this period, the religious leadership was certainly not without its impact as well. In fact, the papacy—that other ruling sphere within the dichotomy of the spiritual and the worldly—stood at the forefront of events. A strong, dominant, even heroic figure occupied center-stage, in the person of Pope Innocent III.

Generally acknowledged as the most powerful of medieval popes, Innocent was intimately involved in the power politics of his day. Innocent preached the notion of the papal monarchy, the idea that the pope was not only the ecclesiastical leader, but also the rightful political ruler of the world. Only months after assuming the throne of St. Peter in 1198, Innocent became embroiled in the so-called double election—a dispute within Germany over the successor to Barbarossa's son, the Holy Roman Emperor Heinrich VI, who had died unexpectedly in 1197. Because the imperial throne was technically not hereditary, and because Heinrich's son Friedrich (Barbarossa's grandson, later to become Emperor Friedrich II) was at that time only three years of age, the German princes had little choice but to turn to Heinrich's brother, Philip of Swabia, as the next Holy Roman Emperor. The Pope, wishing to maneuver events to his own political advantage, injected himself and his office into the now smoldering unrest within Germany. First, he backed the cause of a rival claimant, Otto of Brunswick, who presented an ostensibly lesser threat to papal prerogatives. Then, as events began to shift, Innocent threw his support behind Philip, only to revert later (following Philip's assassination) to Otto. In time, however, Otto's encroachments on various papal territories caused Innocent to turn from him again and to champion the accession of the young Friedrich, who was eventually crowned emperor in 1212 at the age of eighteen. As a result of these imbroglios, there was no single, universally recognized leader of the Holy Roman Empire for a period of approximately a decade and a half. For much of this time, Germany was mired in political uncertainty and periodic outbreaks of civil war. While much of this strife would likely have ensued even without papal intervention, clearly Pope Innocent had stirred up the embers of unrest and had played at least a supporting role in the unfortunate unfolding of events.

In this question of papal versus secular authority, we find yet another instance of the interplay between life and literature during the high Middle Ages.