

Traces of Orality in Charlemagne's Thieving Adventure

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Tradition offers two different names for Charlemagne's helper in his thieving expedition: Basin or Elegast. This paper summarizes earlier critics' ideas why this occurs, then proposes the concept of "oral reservoir." It implies nonlinear choices to complete and complement tales during recounting. Examining all surviving versions, we find both intertwining of motifs and migration of motifs between versions. "Alegast" would have been a choice made in the *Krønike*, influenced by the presence of ballads with that name in Denmark.

In the tradition of the story of Charlemagne's thieving expedition there is a peculiarity in the naming of Charlemagne's helper. He is called "Elegast" (and variations) in one part of the tradition and "Basin" in another. In particular, the difference on this point between the Old Norse *Karlamagnús saga* (that has Basin) and the Middle Danish *Karl Magnus' krønike* (that uses Alegast) has puzzled scholars, because the *Krønike* derives from the *Saga* and therefore should have Basin. This paper discusses how the name Basin came to be substituted by Alegast: we will first look at the explanations, or rather speculations, of earlier research, then I will give my hypothesis about the role of oral transmission; and finally we will look at the evidence and discuss a number of examples that illustrate this hypothesis.

Earlier research

From early on, the name switch was pointed out as an anomaly. In 1860 Unger wrote in the introduction to his edition of the *Karlamagnús saga*:

Mærkeligt er det, at Tyvens Navn i den danske Bearbejdelse af Karl Magnus ogsaa er Alegast ok ikke Basin, som i den norske. Skulde det Haandskrift, som forelaa Oversætteren, have Navnet i denne Form, eller skulde man ikke snarere i Danmark dengang have kjendt en Kjæmpevis, der handlede om samme Begivenhed, og hvorfra Oversætteren kunde have taget Navnet Alegast? (Unger, *Karlamagnús saga*, p. XIII, n. 4).

It is surprising that the thief's name in the Danish adaptation of "Karl Magnus" also is Alegast instead of Basin, like in the Norwegian. Did the manuscript that the translator used have the

name in that form, or was it rather that people in Denmark knew songs about this event from which the translator took the name Alegast?

Unfortunately Unger does not argue his point. A plausible hypothesis for the name switch was proposed in 1874 by Gustav Storm. He states:

Dette er den eneste Inflydelse, de tyske Bearbejdelser af Karlskredsen have havt i Danmark i 15de og 16de Aarhundrede, og endda er det ligesaa sandsynligt, at dette Navn er invandret til Danmark fra Holland, hvorfra Danmark i omtrent de samme Aar fik sin første Borgtrykker [...] (Storm, *Sagnkredsene*, p.163, n. 1).

This is the only influence that the German adaptations of the Matter of Charlemagne had in Denmark in the 15th and 16th century, and then again it is just as likely that the name came to Denmark from Holland, from where Denmark got its first book printer in about the same year [...].

This first printer in Denmark was the Dutchman Govert van Ghemen. He worked in Copenhagen from 1493 until 1495 and again from 1505 till 1510. During the second period he made at least one chapbook printing of the *Karl Magnus' krønike*, probably in 1509. He may have recognized the story that he knew in its Dutch version and “corrected” the name of the thief. But even if that is what happened, this still doesn’t explain the matter completely because the name Alegast already turns up in the so-called Børglum manuscript and dating from 1480. That manuscript predates the first chapbook. Hjort demonstrated in 1965 that manuscript and chapbooks, independent of each other, are based on the same source. So, it is not impossible that Van Ghemen changed the name in the chapbook, but that does not account for the presence of “Alegast” in the manuscript.

Two Dutch scholars, Kuiper and Ramondt, commented on the possible influence of oral transmission, but they differed on the feasibility of that solution. In 1890 Kuiper wrote:

Eerder zou ik het een nieuw bewijs achten voor de bekendheid van de Elegast overlevering in de germaansche landen, en aannemen, dat de naamsverwisseling door de deensche bewerkers onafhankelijk van onze *Elegast* is volbracht. In aanmerking genomen de wijze, waarop de verwerking der *Saga* tot de deensche kroniek waarschijnlijk is tot stand gekomen, te weten niet alleen langs literarischen weg, maar veeleer een tijd lang door mondelinge overdracht, dan is het zeer mogelijk, dat eene van ouds bekende overlevering haren invloed heeft geoefend op het nu uit den vreemde ingvoerde verhaal (Kuiper, *Karel ende Elegast*, p. 21).

I rather would consider it new evidence of the popularity of the Elegast story in the Germanic countries and assume that the Danish adaptor independently switched the names. Considering the way in which the Saga has been adapted into the Danish chronicle, that is to say not so much through literary means, but rather through a long oral transmission, it is very well possible that a tradition known of old has influenced the story that was taken from foreign literature.

In 1917 Ramondt refuted this possibility because she saw insufficient evidence.

[...] vergelijken we de Deensche versie met haar bron, de *Kms*, dan is de vertaling zoo nauwkeurig, zonder eenige bijvoeging van een andere overlevering, dat we van samensmelting van twee *Karel ende Elegast*-sagen niet kunnen spreken (Ramondt, *Karel ende Elegast oorspronkelijk?*, p. 67).

[...] if we compare the Danish version with its source, the *Karlmagnús saga*, the translation is so meticulous, without any addition from any other tradition, that we cannot consider it to be a merging of two *Karel ende Elegast* traditions.

These early speculations were repeated by later researchers without being confirmed or invalidated. That so far no one has come up with a satisfactory explanation as to how Basin's name came to be altered is in my view due to the fact that the angle of approach was decided by research into written sources, in which relationships between texts are perceived as sequential. Since research into text affiliation failed to provide us with an answer, we need to take a different approach. My hypothesis bears upon the influence through oral transmission, though not in the way Kuiper had in mind. Where his description implies a chain of telling and retelling, I argue the existence of a reservoir from which narrators—both tellers and writers—could draw at will.

Oral reservoir

The assumption of such a reservoir of narrative materials corresponds more closely to the reality of storytelling than the rectilinear, hierarchical approach of stemma research. This is because a narrator is not bound to use the materials that are at his disposal in a fixed order. The story at hand is part of the accumulated knowledge of all stories, historical and fictional, that the narrator—and his public for that matter—have come across, forming a reservoir, so to speak, in their heads. A narrator can choose to copy a story exactly as he first heard it but he can also decide to adapt. Such an adaptation can range from a slight variation—maybe caused by a mistake during retelling—to a completely new version or even a translation. To this end the narrator can draw more or less freely on the reservoir of stories he is familiar with. He will be

bound by rules of convention, but can use motifs, characters and even whole events to adapt a story if he wishes to do so. If he decides to adapt, he will try to find details that fit that particular story. Presumably the role of a reservoir was greater in an oral situation than after a text had been written down, but also during written transmission an adaptor may have drawn on the reservoir in his head.

The thieving story, of course, is only a small part of the Matter of Charlemagne, and that, in turn, was only a small part of all known stories, fictional and historical. Let us check the content of the reservoir with regards to the thieving adventure.

Content of the reservoir

The story was known in a wide area and in different genres: a rhymed romance, a prose story, a ballad, a play, presumably as a *chanson de geste* and with certainty in references in other *chansons de geste*, in chronicles and in a “Mirror for Princes.” Apart from this, a master thief named Elegast was a well-known character in folktales (Ramondt, *Karel ende Elegast oorspronkelijk?*, pp.50-52).

The existence of the Old French **Chanson de Basin* and possibly a **Couronnement de Charlemagne* that contained the story is a hypothesis that scholars have proposed, but no such texts have come to light yet (Skårup, “Contenu,” pp. 331-55). The play we know of only through its title *Wie Koning Karel stelen vor mit Ollegaste* (Ramondt, *Karel ende Elegast oorspronkelijk?*, p. 50). It is supposed to have been performed in 1450 in Lübeck, as a *Fastnachtspiel*. In Austria, about 1309, Engelbrecht von Admont refers in his *Speculum virtutum moralium*, a Mirror for Princes, to a story with the title *Carolo et Arbogasto* (van Oostrom, “Karel ende Arbogast,” pp. 31-39). Even shorter allusions can be found in texts like the Dutch *Lekenspiegel* by Jan van Boendale (ca. 1325). Longer references have been recorded in, for example, chronicles such as the one by Albericus Triumfontium (thirteenth century) and the Dutch chapbook printing of the “Vier Heemskinderen” (de Ruiter, “*Karl Magnus’ Krønike*,” pp. 96-102). Two French *chansons de geste* contain proper summaries: *Renaus de Montauban* (thirteenth or fourteenth century) (ed. Michelant, pp. 266-67), and *Le restor du paon* (fourteenth century) (ed. Carey, pp. 69-70). In these summaries we know the thief’s name as Basin.

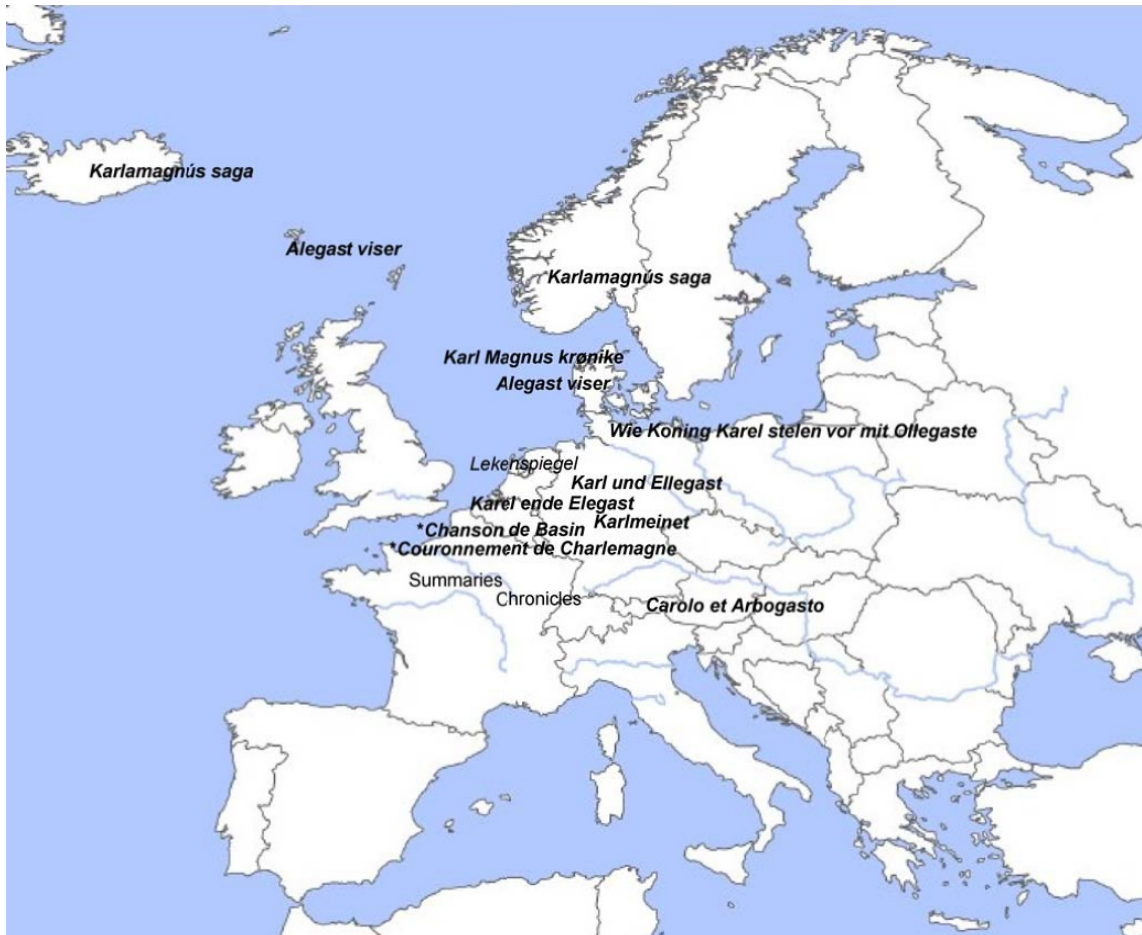
Only the romance, the prose story and the ballad version survive in full text. They represent different versions.

Romance

The romance is in paired rhyme. This version is known as *Karel ende Elegast* (ed. Claassens). The emphasis of the story lies on the burglary that Charlemagne and Elegast commit, and on the discovery of the plot. The thwarting of the plot and trial of the conspirators are treated in far less detail. The adventure takes place at a time later in Charlemagne’s life. Within the Matter of Charlemagne, the rhymed romance is an independent story that is no part in a long running feud or war.

This romance dates from the thirteenth, maybe even the twelfth century. It has been handed down in Middle Dutch and in German. Of the German sources the adaptation *Karl und Ellegast* in the so called Zeitzer codex is especially interesting in view of orality.

Spread of the Thieving Story



Prose version

The prose version, contained in the *Karlamagnús saga* (ed. Unger) and the *Karl Magnus krønike* (ed. Hjort), is less well known. Here the story of the thieving expedition constitutes the first chapters of a compilation about Charlemagne's life. In this version Charlemagne is still young. He receives the command to go out thieving shortly after the death of his father. The discovery of the conspiracy is just the beginning of a long and detailed account of how he establishes his power. The prose version derives from a lost French source and has been handed down in Old Norse (twelfth century) and in Middle Danish (fifteenth century).

Ballads

The third version that has been handed down in full is little known. In Danish and Faroese the adventure has been put to music in ballads, the so-called *Alegast viser* (de Ruiter, "Songs of Alegast"). Ballads are short narrative folk songs that are used to accompany folk dances. They narrate their story in short episodes that concentrate on the dramatic highlights. The story of the burglary differs according to which scenes have been chosen and in most ballads it ends immediately after the discovery of the conspiracy. Charlemagne is sometimes indicated as "prince" and sometimes as "emperor," so the adventure can either be placed in his youth or when he is reigning king.

Because balladry is preeminently an oral genre, the ballads were recorded late and all our written sources are postmedieval. However proof of the existence of ballads about Charlemagne is given by references as early as in the fifteenth century to a ballad about Holger Danske, Ogier le Danois.

The *Alegast viser* were put in writing for the first time in the seventeenth century in Middle Danish and as late as in the nineteenth century on the Færø islands. Being an oral genre, the ballads are of particular interest for this study.

Application of the reservoir

To demonstrate the existence of the reservoir we will examine the available texts on the presence of names, motifs and events that seem to "migrate" from one version to another, such as the name switch of Basin-Alegast.

Intertwining

If the reservoir contains more than one version of a story, the narrator may draw on every version he knows, at will or by mistake. When it is done by mistake this may lead to a sort of intertwining of motifs.

In the romance and the prose version the booty that is taken during the burglary differs. In the romance, to crown his deed, Elegast decides to steal a valuable saddle:

Elegast die hiet hem ontbieden:
Hi soude om eenen sadel gaen

[.....]

Die soonste die noyt man sach

(*Karel ende Elegast*, ed. Claassens, ll. 847-51)

Elegast asked him to wait

He wanted to get a saddle

[.....]

The most beautiful ever seen.

In the prose version, a horse is stolen:

lønlege sade Alegast karl bliff hoss hæstenæ Jeg will for
søge om je kan stielæ greffuens hest.

(*Karl Magnus krønike*, ed. Hjort. p. 140)

Alegast whispered, "Stay here Karl, I will try to steal the earl's horse."

In none of the ballads is the actual theft completed, but in the Danish ballads, horse and saddle have been intertwined. First Karl and Alegast set out to steal a horse:

Wi will os till greffuens gaerd
och stiele hans ganger hand rider paa

(*Danmarks gamle Folkeviser*, ed. Grundtvig and Olrik, 469 A, st. 18)

We will go to the earl's castle
and steal his horse.

but a few stanzas later, they discuss the theft of a saddle:

Huoer skaell wi greffuens sadell faae?
der henger saa mange bielder paae.

(*Danmarks gamle Folkeviser*, ed. Grundtvig and Olrik, 469 A, st. 22)

Where can we find the earl's saddle?
It has so many bells.

The Zeitzer version shows similar intertwining with regards to tack and horse:

Snellichen in der stunt
bant he zûsammen in ein gebunt satel und korpertyre
und dy steyreyffe thyre.

(*Karel ende Elegast*, ed. Bastert et al., ll. 789-92)

Quickly
he gathered together
the saddle, the horse blanket
and the valuable stirrups.

He zoch ein roß uz demm stalle.
[.]
Daz gerette he uff daz roß leyte.
He fûrte daz gerete dorch dy wepener gemeine.

(*Karel ende Elegast*, ed. Bastert et al., ll. 804, 808-09)

He took a horse from the stable
He put the tack on the horse
and led it through the armed guards.

However, when the thief gets back to his companion, again only the tack is mentioned, while the horse has disappeared.

Actually, intertwining is quite common and many examples can be found, also in earlier stages of the tradition. In the summary of the story in *Renaus de Montauban* the attack is to take place at Christmas:

Quand je cuidai avoir tot mon regne aquité
Dont jurerent ma mort trestot li .xii. per;
Si me durent mordre par .i. jor de Noël.

(Ed. Michelant, ll. 27-29)

In *Le restor du paon* the date is set at Whitsunday:

“Dame,” dist le traïstres, “Karles murdis sera
A ceste Pentecouste que plus ne vivera.”

(Ed. Carey, ll. 618-19)

In the prose version, which derives from the French, both dates are mentioned. First, during the break-in, the time of the crowning, and consequently that of the attack, is specified to be Christmas:

hann ætlar at lata uigia sik til kongs at iolum j Eirs borg
ok bera koronu. En vær xii er rikasztir erum i kongsins
vellði hofum suarit eid at vær skolum hann sigra
[...]Vær hofum latid gera xii hnifa tuieggiada af hinu
hardazsta stali ok a iola kuolldit er hann hefir halldit
hird sina skolu vær drepa hann ok alla menn hans.

(*Karlamagnús saga*, ed. Togeby, B2, 30-34)

He intends to have himself consecrated as king in Eiss at Christmas, and to bear the crown. And we, the twelve most powerful men in the king's realm, have sworn that we shall vanquish him [...] We have had 12 double-edged knives made of the hardest steel and on Christmas eve, when he has held counsel, we will kill him and all his men with him.

The actual crowning however, is taking place on Whitsunday:

Naflun spurdi “nær vili þer lata uigaz herra” sagði hann. Karllamagnus svaradi “a Þriggia missara fresti” sagði hann “a huitasunnu dege ef gud lofar [...]”

(*Karlamagnús saga*, ed. Togeby, B4, 55-58)

Namlun asked: “When do you wish to be consecrated, lord?” Karlamagnus answered: “In three seasons time,” he said “on Whitsunday, if God permits [...]”

Fitting

A narrator may also adapt intentionally. If he feels that something is missing, he may add a motif, drawing on the matter which the story at hand is part of, the Matter of Charlemagne in this case. In the Zeitzer version a motif has been added to explain the enmity between Charlemagne and Elegast.

ume den dyep herzogen Ellegaste,
“der mir Ludewigen erslûg,

[.....]

myt eime worftofelenbrete thot.”

(*Karel ende Elegast*, ed. Bastert et al., ll. 240-241, 245)

the thief, duke Ellegast

“who killed Ludwig

[.....]

with a game board.”

A little later it is clarified that Ludwig is Charlemagne’s nephew, which makes the homicide a crime against Charlemagne’s kin.

In the prose version Charles and his helper have had no prior dealings, and in all other texts of the romance, the trouble between them is due to a small misdemeanour, a theft that Elegast once committed. The motif of manslaughter of a relative is a far stronger justification for hostility between a king and his vassal. The specification that the weapon was a game board can be found elsewhere, in the story of *Les quatre fils Aymon*. Apparently the adaptor felt that the quarrel with Elegast needed a better, stronger explanation, and borrowed a motif from another story in the Matter of Charlemagne. This motif is only present in the Zeitzer version.

Connecting to the matter of Charlemagne

The narrator may also use an “extraneous” motif to tie his story more securely to the matter it is part of. This seems to be the case with the refrain of one ballad. Its content doesn’t have any connection to the burglary or any other part of the thieving story. It just calls a famous event to mind, namely the battle of Roncevaux:

Riða teir út af Frakklandi,

við dýrum drignum svørð,

blæs í hornið Olivant

í Runsival!

(*Corpus Carminum Færoensium*, ed. Djurhuus, 106 B, refrain)

They came from France

with drawn swords

blew the horn Olifant

in Roncevaux!

In the last stanza of this same ballad Holger Danske is called upon, which strengthens the tie even further.

Adding something to the story

A narrator can also take motifs that are altogether from outside the tradition of the story and the matter it belongs to, if he feels that this motif fits the story particularly well, and embellish it. All versions agree that Charlemagne is an incompetent thief who needs help. One ballad and the Zeitzer version beautify this by presenting Charlemagne as someone who never has had any grounds to try to disguise his presence, while for Alegast it is second nature to act stealthily.

Karlamagnus reið so harða,
niður skulvu allir garðar.
Aligast reið so tvisti,
tað rørdist leyv, ei listi
(*Corpus Carminum*, ed. Djurhuus, 106 A, str. 12-13)

Charlemagne rode so heavily
that everything shook.
Aligast rode so softly,
that not a leaf or a twig moved.

The same motif appears in the *Zeitzer* version:

Ellegastes roß ging lyse und nicht sere,
also ob es in eime schiff gezogen were.
Konnig Karles roß ginck in allen den geferen,
ob dy lant sin eigen weren.
(*Karel ende Elegast*, ed. Bastert et al., ll. 470-73)

Ellegast's horse trod softly and carefully
as if he were drawn forward on a ship.
King Charles's horse trod very heavily
as if all the land were his.

Though this motif does complement the content of the story, it is only used in those two places. Of course it is possible that the motif has been omitted from all other versions, instead of being added here, but it seems more likely that the element has been taken from the reservoir and added because it fitted so well.

Conclusion

We have seen that the story of Charlemagne's thieving expedition was known through large parts of Europe, in a wide array of versions. The examples given illustrate that within and between these versions motifs migrated. In some cases they were intertwined, as may happen when a narrator is familiar with two versions and mixes them up. Intentional adaptations were made if another motif gave a "better" detail, to connect the story to the Matter of Charlemagne, or because it contributed something extra to the content. The migration of motifs demonstrates that a reservoir existed from which the narrators could draw.

With the help of our observations we now can answer the question how the name Alegast came to replace Basin in the *Krønike*. Both names were part of the reservoir of Charlemagne's thieving adventure. The narrator used his knowledge and chose Alegast. The assumption that his choice was influenced by the presence of the ballads in Denmark underlines the way in which the reservoir worked.

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