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Review Article

E. Rombauts. "Le *Karel ende Elegast* néerlandais et la *Chanson de Basin." Études Germaniques,* 31 (1976), 369-391.

Dr. Rombauts's observations on the extant Middle Dutch *Karel ende Elegast* ("Charles and Elegast") and the presumed lost *Chanson de Basin* were prompted by some new views of this material put forward by Paul Aebischer in his introduction to *Textes norrois et Littérature française du Moyen Âge, II: La première branche de la Karlamagnús saga.*[1] Here, contrary to the opinion he expressed earlier,[2] Aebischer argued that the Basin/Elegast story was not an independent work interpolated into the saga (as was, for example, *Girard de Viane)* but an integral part of the source of Part I, which those who know Aebischer's work—and the controversies it has aroused—will recall he consistently maintained to be a lost originally independent *Vie romancée* of Charlemagne, referred to in his latest work as the *Vie et chronique guerrière, mondaine et scandaleuse de Charlemagne et de sa cour.* Rombauts does not directly question the *Vie romancée* theory, although he cites some who do; he concentrates on the question of the separate existence of a *Chanson de Basin,* which most other students of the subject, following Gaston Paris, have assumed to have been one of a cycle of *Enfances de Charlemagne* romances, taking its place along with *Berte aus grans piés* and *Mainet.*

Supporting the theory of an independent *Basin,* Rombauts cites the well-known allusions to Basin in various chansons de geste, but, above all, protests the assumption that the Basin episode in *Karlamagnús saga* necessarily represents the earliest version of this material. He quite rightly feels more attention should have been paid to the independent witness of the *Elegast* in this connection, pointing out that Gaston Paris's influential résumé of that poem depended on purely second-hand knowledge. Thus, he suggests, it hardly did justice to the Middle-Dutch poem, which seems closer in spirit, as well as form, to French epic than does the brief Norse prose account. Further, he maintains that, unlike the saga version, it is an

unqualified artistic success. Since he might be accused of parochialism here, he cites French and German witnesses to the quality of the poem.

After discussing manuscript problems and textual history, Rombauts argues for a date in the first few years of the thirteenth century. This would make *Karel ende Elegast* predate the *Aa* version of the saga, which must have been composed close to the middle of the century. He then proceeds with an analysis and extended summary of the *Elegast.* It will hardly do justice to Rombauts to condense his resumé further here, but some account is necessary to explain his conclusions about the structure and themes of the poem. It falls into four parts, as follows:

(1) Charlemagne is instructed by an angel in a dream to go out and commit robbery. While everyone else sleeps, he ventures reluctantly forth, praying for God's guidance.

(2) Pondering his predicament, Charlemagne thinks of the duke Elegast, whom he has exiled "for little cause" and who has been forced to turn robber; he wishes for his company. His wish is immediately granted, but the two do not recognize each other and engage in a duel. When Elegast divulges his identity, Charlemagne makes an end of the duel, alleging himself to be a fellow robber-baron, and proposes a mutual raid on the emperor's property. Elegast's indignant refusal proves that despite the way the emperor has mistreated him, he remains staunchly loyal. He in turn proposes that, instead, they rob the emperor's brother-in-law: a proposal to which Charlemagne gladly accedes, considering it "safer" to take his own sister's goods.

(3) Elegast—without any real help from Charlemagne, who displays comic incompetence—robs the house of the brother-in-law, Eggeric. In the course of his raid, he overhears Eggeric tell his wife of a plot to assassinate Charlemagne; she (naturally) protests, and her husband strikes her. Elegast is able to scoop up some of the blood that runs from her nose as evidence. He wishes to kill Eggeric, but Charlemagne restrains him and, after once more testing his sentiments towards the emperor, determines to make reparations for his earlier injustice. He promises Elegast to help him make his peace with the emperor.

(4) The next day, when exposed, Eggeric denies his guilt and insists on trial by combat; Elegast is appointed to be the emperor's champion. By the clear judgment of God, Elegast prevails, is restored to high position, and is given Eggeric's widow, thus becoming the emperor's brother-in-law.

Obviously, this is a tables-turned tale, in which the false brother-in-law is exposed as a traitor while the presumed traitor is exonerated and replaces his opposite. Elegast shows his noble character in exile by robbing only the rich, and then only because he has been completely deprived of other means of livelihood; Eggeric, alone with his wife, proves himself a brute as well as a traitor and, when exposed, blusters on arrogantly. Elegast's men are so loyal they accompany him into exile, while Eggeric's fellow conspirators try to disassociate themselves when the plot is revealed. The unfairly exiled Elegast, whose mistreatment at the hands of Charlemagne might entitle him to feel resentment, is loyal to both Charlemagne and God, praying devoutly before he fights Eggeric; Eggeric, whose close relationship to the emperor ought to have assured his utmost loyalty, shows contempt for king and God, not bothering so much as to sign himself with the cross before the duel, although he knows himself to be in the wrong.

Rombauts sees the special interest of the poem in its concentration on the psychological processes through which Charlemagne gradually comes to realize how wrong he has been in his judgment of these two men; he also points out the humor of the situation in which Charlemagne makes a most unconvincing attempt to act like a "robber." (In fact, the tone of the poem is comic much of the time, not just at that one point: it thus may bear comparison with the *Pèlerinage de Charlemagne* for more reasons than similar length, a point made by Rombauts and others.) Further, Rombauts identifies two principal themes: Charlemagne's success at overcoming enemies and saving his life and throne as a result of a divinely ordered strange mission, embarked upon hesitantly but carried out because of the strength of his faith, and, second, his righting of an injustice against a man he had wronged. Thus, Rombauts maintains, the poem combines two of the most characteristic themes of the chansons de geste and *romans de chevalerie.*

That *Karel ende Elegast* is superior in literary quality to the Basin episode in the *Karlamagnús saga* (which it surely is) does not, of course, prove that it is closer to a lost *Chanson de Basin.* Yet there are points which suggest that—at least in certain respects—it may well be. The Basin of the saga is an anomalous figure in comparison with Elegast: the saga's angel tells Karl (not yet "Karlamagnus") expressly to "send for Basin, the thief," as his companion in crime; he is sent for and arrives promptly; although initially afraid of the king, when welcomed and told he will be Karl's companion in robbery, he asks to become Karl's vassal and makes his "submission" to him. An ordinary thief would hardly be known to a king and his entourage; nor could he become a "vassal," and, later, one of the king's chief advisors, gaining the title of "Earl of Tung" formerly held by the traitor he has helped expose (as well as that traitor's widow in marriage). Thus it may be suspected that *Karel ende Elegast* is nearer to the "original" version here, even though the only other reasonably full account of the conspiracy plot, that of *Renaud de Montauban,* like the saga, does not establish any previous relationship between king and thief; a reformed thief of ignoble background simply does not make sense.

The names of the "thief and the traitor in the saga are, however, clearly from older French sources. Why, then, "Elegast" and "Eggeric" in place of names corresponding to French "Basin" and "Rainfroi"? Perhaps this was a careful stroke on the part of the poet: wishing to underline the reverse parallel between the two, he *may* have made the thief more noble in background than older versions stated him to be, but perhaps more certainly, he paired the two names to sound alike, in that they alliterate and have the same number of syllables, while probably having contrasting etymological meanings, possibly something like "exile" vs. "in power." This is pure guess work, however, partially ventured on Old English analogies such as Grendel's epithet of "ellor gast" in *Beowulf.*

The saga also seems to preserve an older tradition in placing this episode before the coronation of Charlemagne, since the chief traitor there bears the name of Charlemagne's usurping half-brother in *Berte aus grans piés* and *Mainet;* but the saga does not say "Renfrei" is related to Karl, a detail apparently retained by the *Elegast* poet, who may have seen reason to change the character from a half-brother to a brother-in-law. If he knew

other traditions about that half-brother, he would have known Charlemagne could not have trusted him. The change in the time from the beginning of the emperor's reign to a much later period (Karel remarks that he rules the Roman empire, mentioning even Galicia and Spain as part of his domain) would make sense to anyone who wished to explain the "thief as an exiled baron: it would hardly have been Charlemagne's fault if such a baron had been exiled before he came to power.

Perhaps, then, it is time to reconsider exactly what the lost "Chanson de Basin" was likely to have contained. The analysis above suggests that neither the saga version nor the *Elegast* can represent accurately all aspects of the original version: the *Elegast-poel* has clearly reshaped his material in various ways, and the saga both raises problems in the ambiguity of the nature of Basin and in its lack of correspondence to *Mainet,* at the end of which we understand Rainfroi and Heudri are executed. Further, both the saga "Basin" episode and *Mainet* purport to give the reason why Charles became Charlemagne by explaining the addition as a pseudonym adopted to protect the young prince/king's anonymity. I conclude that *Mainet* can be largely ignored in considering the content of "Basin," except for the names (and relationships) it provides and the parallel of a plot to keep Charles from the throne, emanating from these false "brothers."

But there are a number of other sources of information which must be taken into account: the narrative of the plot in *Renaut de Montauban* and the résumé of a poem on the subject in the chronicle of Alberic des Trois-Fontaines are especially important, but certain details emerge from briefer references in, e.g., the *Restor de Paon* and *Elie de Saint Gilles.* It would seem likely that details which persist—or at least are not denied—in the majority of these accounts must come from the "original" version. Selecting such details, I would tentatively advance the following scenario:

(1) A conspiracy arose to kill and usurp the power of Charlemagne near the time of his coronation. (The saga is in disagreement with all other accounts in scheduling the assassination for the time of the coronation ceremonies, but the usurping brother(s) would not be likely to have waited many years after.)

(2) The conspiracy involved twelve treacherous barons: the number given in the saga and in *Renaut de Montauban.* While others mention only the chief conspirator, one man working alone could hardly have expected to succeed both in killing the king and in usurping his power. The correspondence of the number with the Twelve Peers is interesting: it may have been introduced as a contrast after the concept of the Twelve was well established, but it might also have been used to explain why Charlemagne later established a trustworthy group of the same number as the false group.[3]

(3) The conspiracy was scheduled to come to fruition at a Christmas feast (saga, *Renaut).* The other accounts are vague about the date but do not preclude Christmas.

(4) The chief conspirator was Heudri, with or without his brother Rainfroi. (Possibly, if we take *Mainet* as preceding, one or both was pardoned and assumed to be a loyal vassal and relative.) Heudri is named in the saga *(Heldri)* as second only to "Renfrei" and appears in Alberic as "Hardericus": *Renaut's* "Gerin" may be picked up in the "Garin" of *Elie de Saint Gilles,* but the weight of *Mainet* (and, perhaps, *Berte ans grans piés)* argues for Heudri, with or without Rainfroi—who is not mentioned in Alberic's chronicle—as chief conspirator. A later poet who knew *Mainet* might have thought Heudri impossible here and substituted Gerin/Garin.

(5) In all sources which give any real details, Charles was warned by an angel in a dream; in all except Alberic (who gives only a brief summary of the poem he reports) the angel bid Charles to go out and rob; in all sources which deal with the robbing expedition, Charles had as a companion a man who is, in some way, a thief, outlaw, or exile forced to rob for a living; and the name given everywhere except *Elegast* for the "thief is Basin.

(6) Charles either knew or knew of Basin; he either joined him or summoned him to his presence. It seems clear, in view of this prior knowledge of the man and his later elevated position among Charlemagne's vassals in both the full versions, that this man had come of noble origins and had probably fallen into disgrace, leading to expulsion from court circles and the need to rob for a living. As in both the fuller versions Basin/Elegast is both afraid of meeting with the king and desirous

of making his loyalty to the king clear, one may presume he had been falsely accused of disloyalty—possibly, of plotting to keep Charles from acceding to the throne (which may have some connection with the Rainfroi-Heudri plot of *Mainet).*

(7) Charles could not have chosen to rob the house of a near-relative (and Heudri or Rainfroi or both must have been half-brothers, step-brothers, or in some other brotherly relationship to Charles, when we compare the facts set out in *Berte, Mainet,* and *Elegast)* by sheer accident, without knowing whose house it was; the choice must have been made because Basin preferred to rob those who could afford a loss (note that in the saga there is no question of their robbing the *poor* people whose house they visit en route) and/or because Charles felt he could make prompt restitution to his own family.

(8) Basin made use of a "charm," probably a powerful herb, to ensure that the guards would sleep while the house was robbed. While not in the saga account, this detail alluded to in other sources seems to be echoed in the divinely ordained sleep which falls upon Karel's own household when he goes out in the middle of the night in *Elegast.*

(9) All the actual "robbing" was done by Basin, who was the one to overhear the false "brother" confide his seditious plans to his wife in bed. Only the saga version has Charles himself overhear the conversation and catch the tell-tale blood which gushes from the wife's nose when her husband strikes her for daring to protest.

(10) On the return to court, Charles consulted with his leading counselors—of whom the Duke of Bavaria (Naimes or, in the saga, his father) is prominent—and plans were made to foil the conspiracy. This was done, the conspirators captured and executed, and Basin was rewarded with the widow of the chief conspirator, along with his lands and rank.

(11) Finally, there is no way to be sure whether or not the original *Basin* included the motif of the pseudonym which was to lead to the name change of Charles to Charlemagne; if it harmonized with the *Mainet,* it should not have had that detail: but it may have presented an alternate version to the *Mainet* rather than a sequel.

To return to Rombauts's article and the question of the place of the *Karel ende Elegast* in the "Basin" tradition, it does seem clear that the *Elegast* poet made some highly significant changes in his material. He may, nevertheless, be closer to the original in some respects than is the saga version. In any case, we should be grateful to Dr. Rombauts for making this material available in a language understood by those of us who have difficulty in reading Dutch,[4] and we may hope he will see fit to continue studying the problems raised here rather than abandoning the solution "aux romanistes," as he threatens.

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'(Geneve, 1972), pp. 33-39.

[2] *Textes narrais …, I*: *recherches sur les traditions épiques antérieures à la* Chanson de Roland *d'après les données de la première branche de la* Karlamagnús saga (Genève, 1954), p. 26.

[3]Some sources say the normal quota for a Germanic *comitatus* was always twelve.

[4]Much of what Rombauts has to say in this article will be found (in Dutch) in fuller form in the introduction to his edition, with modernized spelling, of *Karel ende Elegast*, Klassieken Nederlandse Letterkunde (Culemborg, 1973).