

# THE LAY OF HILDEBRAND, AN OLD DUTCH CONTRIBUTION TO GERMAN LITERATURE

RICHARD D'ALQUEN

## I. Introducing the problem.

The Lay of Hildebrand (see Appendix), preserved in a text of the first half of the ninth century, has sixty-eight alliterating lines and is known to all high school pupils in German speaking countries as the earliest piece of literature in German, the sole representative in German of a heroic lay in the Germanic style.<sup>1</sup>

Two champions face each other in single combat. In an early form of flashback we learn that due to Odoaker's hostility, Dietrich (Theoderick the Great) had been forced to leave his own land, and his dearest thane, Hildebrand, had followed, leaving behind his wife and baby son. After thirty years of battles and wanderings, Dietrich had returned to his land, and Hildebrand had been chosen as his representative in a duel with the champion of the lord now in power. The two ride out to do battle, but as is the custom, the older man, Hildebrand, asks who his opponent is. In the dramatic dialogue which fills most of the poem, Hildebrand realises that his opponent is his own son, and tries to avert conflict. The son refuses to believe that Hildebrand is his father and insults him, making combat a certainty. They begin to fight. The end of the poem is missing, but from related sources we assume that the son is killed.

The text was written by two scribes, perhaps as early as 810, perhaps as late as 840. Scribe B is fully competent, but writes only a quarter of the second page (to line 41), then hands the job back to A, who completes the second page (to line 68). The last few lines are missing.

For generations the most debated topic has been the dialect mixture of Low German (usually taken as Old Saxon) and High German, itself a mixture of Franconian and Bavarian.

The place of writing is Fulda. Roughly since the turn of the century the dominant view has been that a scribe worked on a High German version with the intent of producing a Low German version. However, his will weakened as he worked, so that the Low German traces are found mainly near the beginning.

I must confess astonishment that such an unlikely theory should ever gain general acceptance. Why should anyone wishing to write in Low German leave the great majority of the forms in the poem in High German? Is it conceivable that a scribe having the intention to translate would not write even the first few lines entirely in the target dialect? If he did indeed give up the intention to translate, why are there clusters of

Low German forms not only near the beginning but also about half-way through and near the end of the text? Why would a translator into Low German, having twice set down **ik** correctly, fail to make this simple and fundamental change from HG **ih** for the remainder of the poem? Why would a translator who refrains from using basic Low German vocabulary – for example, he uses **her** 'he' instead of LG **he** – make use of the idiomatic Low German ethical dative: **ik me de odre wet** (12)?

What we need is a better theory, and that is what this paper aims to provide.

## II. Proposal for a new theory.

The available evidence falls into place much better if we assume a **Low German** written original copied by High German scribes who did not care very much about the original dialect. Scribe A, we assume, began copying with moderately close attention to the vorlage (the original text), with the result that a flurry of Low Germanisms appeared in his first six lines.<sup>2</sup> He made many errors and wrote too large. Near the bottom of the page another cluster of LG forms appears.<sup>3</sup> We invent the explanatory circumstance that Scribe B, clearly a better craftsman, admonished the first upon seeing such a messy, almost completed page. He wrote the first quarter of page two himself – we assume as a model. In that quarter he also followed the vorlage more closely in the first few words, hence two relics.<sup>4</sup> Scribe A, returning to the task, with renewed will to copy carefully, allows the vorlage to influence him close to the new start,<sup>5</sup> but again his High German training and dialect soon obscure the Low German features. At line 60 another group of relics appears,<sup>6</sup> but nothing at this point in the manuscript indicates a change or break. We hypothesize that something occurred to make Scribe A more attentive to the vorlage, perhaps a visit from Scribe B, who might well have remarked that Scribe A was still writing too large to get all the text in.

According to this reconstruction, the distribution of Low German forms in the table is due to unconscious retention of Low Germanisms by High German scribes early in the sections which they copied in one span of concentration. The situation reconstructed fits that of a student scribe using the Lay as an exercise.

Now we must examine the details to confirm

or fault this basic framework.

1. **Medial -tt-**, e.g. **urhēttun** (2) 'warriors' would have single **t** in Low German. Throughout the text, regardless of whether Low German, would have **-t-** or **-tt-**, the Lay has **-tt-**. This has been regarded as the effect of the High German equivalent **zz** in supposed **urheizzun** in the vorlage. In the proposed theory **-tt-** was already in the vorlage, but the effect of HG **-zz-** is not necessarily denied as the original model for the doubling.

This example raises two important issues. The first is that the strange hybrid **-tt-** occurs in all parts of the text. It is a Low German relic of a type not included in the footnoted lists, because it has no contrasting High German **-zz-** and therefore cannot figure in the 'span of concentration' argument. The unshifted **t** of Low German (cf. **water/wazzzer etan / ezzan** etc.) is perhaps the most prominent of all its dialect features and it is not surprising that the scribes, who basically were just coping kept it against their dialect. Along with unshifted **t** they also retained unshifted **p** (**werpan** not **wer(p)fan**) everywhere, but unshifted **k** was left twice and therefore figures in the footnoted lists. **K** can be seen only in the pronoun **ik** (1, 12). The only other consistent Low German feature in the Lay is the loss of **n** before voiceless spirants: LG **gūd** not HG **gund** 'battle', **ūserē** not **unsere** 'our', etc. This, too, is a prominent phonetic feature, not easy to overlook when copying a Low German text. The retention of striking differences from High German leads us to set up a 'Principle of Prominence', which includes the span-of-concentration argument. It holds that the most prominent Low German features have survived best in the process of copying. Features of moderate prominence are likely to be found in the footnoted lists: a typical example is varying root vocalism as in **hēm/heim** 'home'. Non-prominent elements like endings and prepositions should be in High German form. In principle, then, the survival rate of Low German elements should be in direct proportion to their prominence for a High German scribe. With remarkable regularity this is what we find.

The second question raised by the example of **urhēttun** seeks a possible model for **-tt-** in Low German. Old Saxon (the supposed dialect of the vorlage) does not fit. There we find regular observance of the length difference **-tt-** versus **-t-**,<sup>7</sup> but in Old Low Franconian **-tt-** is often found for single **-t-**.<sup>8</sup> If the Lay goes back to an Old Low Franconian original, the **-tt-** is much easier to understand: the scribes may present in the original and were further encouraged by their own HG **-zz-** to set the double consonant. Alternatively **-tt-** may have been without exception in the original.

There are further indications that the original was Old Low Franconian.

2. Parallel to **-tt-**, there is a strange geminate in **-cc-**: **harmlicco** (66). Again Old Saxon is quite strict in contrasting **c** with **cc**, but again our Old Low Franconian documents reveal a considerable proportion of **cc** spellings for single **c** e.g. **withersacco** 'adversarius'.

3. As mentioned in footnote 2 the distribution of **uo** and **o** representing Gmc./o:/ as in **guot** versus **got** 'good' is such that **uo** does not occur in Old Saxon beside **o** – it would seem to have been introduced as a result of copying from High German models – whereas in Old Low Franconian **uo** is normal, and **o** is less frequent even than **u**. Diphthongization of **o** to **uo** seems to have spread from the west, perhaps set off by bilingual speakers of German and early French, for the same change occurred also in the Romance speaking area. Naturally then, the Rhineland would be affected before Fulda or the dialect areas of Saxon or Bavarian.

4. The word **heuan** (30) 'heaven' is only Low German. A High German scribe would find the word novel, hence prominent. It also occurs early in Scribe B's span of concentration. According to our principle it is likely to be a relic of the original. In Old Saxon the spelling **heban** is customary. Spellings with **-u-** are generally Franconian, but since we are dealing with a Low German word, we are guided towards that part of Franconia which is Low German at the same time, namely Old Low Franconian.

5. A more general consideration that supports Old Low Franconian origin is the frequency of etymological connections with Franconian of the Rhine rather than Fulda, where the preserved text was written. The piece of research proving that by its vocabulary the Lay of Hildebrand should be considered of West Franconian origin, was done by Friedrich Kluge<sup>9</sup> over sixty years ago, but it had no effect on the dominant theory of High German origin, because Kluge himself believed it and was able to place the Lay in a High German part of Franconia farther west, namely, Trier. In the light of our present thesis that the original was Low German, there is little conflict with Kluge's evidence but we place the Lay just a little farther north, preferably in the Maas valley, close to the home of Merovingian and Carolingian kings: Herstal, Liege, Maastricht, perhaps Aachen (Dutch: Aken).

6. A similar consideration is the frequency of etymological connections with Old English. A number of words in the Lay are strangely isolated in Old High German, but have striking parallels in Old English: **keisuring** (34) = OE

**cāsering** 'gold' (from the coins with the caesar's head on) is an example. To link the Low Franconian thesis with the question of the Old English cognates, we call on dialect geography. By studying the evidence of Old English, Old Frisian, Old Saxon, Old Franconian and Old High German in relation to European history from the Roman occupation on and in relation to modern dialects, linguistic geographers were able to conclude that long after the settlement of England by Germanic tribes there existed strong linguistic links between England and the Rhineland.<sup>10</sup>

The growing cultural importance of the Middle and Upper Rhine and of Bavaria had the effect of causing a north-eastern drift down the Rhine of many linguistic features. Southern pronoun forms, for example, seem to have been conveyed downstream and to have spread out from the banks. More examples could be given. Let us apply the knowledge of this northward migration to the problem of why the Lay of Hildebrand has a number of words unknown in High German but with parallels in Old English.

Suppose a word like **keisuring** had been in use in the Rhineland it would have been under pressure from the more generally used synonym **golp** 'gold'. The longer word would not have been known to southerners, but northerners knew both words. Let us assume that **keisuring** was incorporated into the Lay in the Low Franconian area while both words were still in use; and that later, under the pressure of southern usage, **keisuring** dropped out of use in Franconian and left the Anglo-Saxons as the only group that continued to use it. In this paper it is claimed that such was the process for the group of words in the Lay that have the closest links with Old English. They hark back to a period of linguistic unity involving England and the Rhineland.

Further examples are:

**heuan** 'heaven' = OE **heofon**, OS **heban** (OHG **himel**);

**mahalen** 'speak' (poetic) = OE **maedlan**, OFris. **mēlia**, ON **maela** (OHG **mahalen** 'to betrotte');

**giweit** 'travelled' from **wītan** = OE **wītan**, OS **wītan** (lacking in OHG);

**irri** 'angry' OE **irre** 'angry' and 'lost', OS **irri** 'angry' (OHG **irri** 'lost' OLF **irren** 'to err');

**scūrim** 'blows in battle' (dat. pl.) as such in OE and OS.

**sceotantero** 'spear throwers' (gen. pl.) = OE **sceotendra**;

**askim** 'spears' (dat. pl.) OE **asc**, OS **ask**.

Such words may have been generally Low German. Their removal from the Lower Rhine did not have to be followed by their removal

from Old Saxon or Old Frisian. Thus in some cases Old Saxon also looked like the original dialect of the Lay, and because we have infinitely more copious records of Old Saxon than Old Frisian or of Old Low Franconian the tendency has always been to ignore the latter two. But I hope to have shown that Old Low Franconian at least deserves more attention. In a fuller study I hope to prove that it is a much better candidate for the language of the written original of the Lay of Hildebrand than Old Saxon, and thereby to create a theory, which a modern concept of nationalities makes appear paradoxical, namely that we are deeply indebted to the Netherlands for the first literary work of art in German.

### Footnotes

<sup>1</sup>For commentary see J. Knight-Bostock. **A Handbook on Old High German Literature**. (Oxford: OUP) 1976, Chapter IV.

<sup>2</sup>Reference is particularly to Low German features which occur at the side of their corresponding High German features: Gmc. **ai** is monophthongized to **e** in **urhettun aenon tuem**; **ik** appears instead of HG **ih** and **seggen** instead of HG **sagen**; **helid** is a uniquely Low German word for 'hero', and **to** points to OE/OS **to** rather than HG **zi**, for which we would expect **ti** in the text. The occurrence of **t** for HG **z** is without exception and is hence not found only at the beginning and not counted in the group that creates a pattern in the text. The question of **ou** for Gmc. **ō** is also raised in the first six lines, where **uo** behaves as the spelling of the Low German vorlage. Erik Rooth, **Saxonica** (Lund), 1949, concludes that the **ouuo** diphthongization, spreading eastwards from Romance speakers, did not affect Old Saxon, although **uo** does appear beside **o** in Old Saxon texts. He regards this a scribal influence. Diphthongization did, however, affect Old Low Franconian, and on this point there is no division of opinion. Cf. W.L. van Helten, **Die altostniederfränkischen Psalmenfragmente** (Groningen) 1902, parag. 16. Examples in the first twelve lines: **muotin** (2) **gistuont** (8) **cnuosles** (11). Counter-examples of Low German relics (that is, in principle, Old Low Franconian) extend little beyond line 12, in which we find also **enan** (HG **einan**) **ik** (HG **ih**) **mi** (HG **mir**) **wet** (HG **weiz**). Beyond line 12 only **mi** (15) appears before a new concentration beginning in line 29.

This includes monophthongized Gmc. **ai** in **wēttu** (30), the **-i-** in **waniu** (29) and the geminate in **habbe** (29). Final **-b-** in **lib** (29) is already High German, but it contrasts with

Upper German (presumably Bavarian) **-p-**, in **leop** (27) and **gap** (34). We therefore regard it as an intermediate stage between Franconian **\*-f-** and Bav. **-p-**, implying the existence of a copy of the Lay between the original and the extant text.

<sup>4</sup>**Ab** (30) is parallel to **lib** of note 3. **Heuan** (30) is a uniquely Low German word, as well as the first noun in Scribe B's passage.

<sup>5</sup>The examples are spread over about as many lines as is the first passage written by Scribe A: LG **mi** (42) – not HG **mir**; **heme** (47) – not HG **heime**; **enigeru** (52) not HG **einigeru**.

<sup>6</sup>**Aerist** (63) (HG **eirist**); **Bedero** (62) (HG **beidero**). **Hrumen** (60) we take as Old Low Franconian with a variant **u** of **uo**, which later we find again in **muotti** (61).

<sup>7</sup>Gerhard Cordes, **Altniederdeutsches Elementarbuch** (Heidelberg: Winter) 1973, IV 1.32. Medial **-tt-** for **-t-** is restricted to historically transparent cases of **ht tt**, except for one example.

<sup>8</sup>van Helten, 1902, p. 8.

<sup>9</sup>Friedrich Kluge, "Die Heimat des Hildebrandsliedes", **Beiträge zur Geschichte der deutschen Sprache und Literatur** 43 (1918), pp. 500-516.

<sup>10</sup>This was a major conclusion reached by Theodor Frings, **Germania Romana I**, Halle, 1966, 140 ff.

## APPENDIX

## The Lay of Hildebrand in the original and English translation

- Ik gihorta dat seggen,  
 dat sih urhettun aenon muotin,  
 Hiltibrant enti Hadubrant untar heriun tuem.  
 sunufatarungo iro saro rihtun.  
 garutun se iro gudhamun, gurtun sih iro suert ana,  
 helidos, ubar hringa, do sie to dero hiltiu ritun,  
 Hiltibrant gimahalta Heribrantes sunu: her uuas heroro man,  
 ferahes frooro; her fragen gistuont  
 fohem uuortum, hwer sin fater wari
- 10 fireo in folche, .....
- ..... "eddo hwelihhes cnuosles du sis.  
 ibi du mi enan sages, ik mi de odre uuert,  
 chind, in chunincriche: chud ist mir al irmindeot."  
 Hadubrant gimahalta, Hiltibrantes sunu:
- 15 "dat sagetun mi usere liuti,  
 alte anti frote, dea erhina warun,  
 dat Hiltibrant haetti min fater: ih heittu Hadubrant.  
 forn her ostar giweit, floh her Otachres nid,  
 hina miti Theotrihhe enti sinero degano filu.
- 20 her furlaet in lante luttilla sitten  
 prut in bure, barn unwahsan,  
 arbeo laosa: her raet ostar hina.  
 des sid Detrihhe darba gistuontun  
 fatereres mines: dat uuas so friuntlaos man.
- 25 her was Otachre ummet tirri,  
 degano dechisto miti Deotrichhe.  
 her was eo folches at ente: imo was eo fehta ti leop:  
 chud was her... chonnem mannum.  
 ni waniu ih iu lib habbe"...
- 30 "wettu irmingot," quad Hiltibrant, "obana ab hevane,  
 dat du neo halt mit sus sippan man  
 dinc ni gileitos"...
- want her do ar arme wuntane bauga,  
 cheisuringu gitan, so imo se der chuning gap,  
 35 Huneo truhtin: "dat ih dir it nu bi haldi gibu."  
 Hadubrant gimahalta, Hiltibrantes sunu:  
 "mit geru scal man geba infahan,  
 ort widar orte. ....
- du bist dir alter Hun, unmet spaher,  
 40 spenis mih mit dinem wortun, wili mih dinu speru werpan.  
 pist also gialtet man, so du ewin inwit fortos.  
 dat sagetun mi seolidante  
 westar ubar wentilseo, dat inan wic furnam:  
 tot ist Hiltibrant, Heribrantes suno."
- 45 Hiltibrant gimahalta, Heribrantes suno:  
 "wela gisihu ih in dinem hrustim,  
 dat du habes heme herron goten,  
 dat du noh bi desemo riche reccheo ni wurti."-  
 "welaga nu, waltant got," quad Hiltibrant, "wewurt skihit.

- 50 ih wallota sumaro enti wintro sehstic ur lante,  
dar man mih eo scerita in folc sceotantero:  
so man mir at burc enigeru banun ni gifasta,  
nu scal mih suasat chind suertu hauwan  
breton mit sinu billiu, eddo ih imo ti banin werdan.
- 55 doh maht du nu aodlihho, ibu dir din ellen taoc,  
in sus heremo man hrusti giwinnan,  
rauba birahanen, ibu dir dar enic reht habes.”  
“der si doh nu argosto,” quad Hiltibrant, “ostarliuto,  
der dir nu wiges warne, nu dih es so wel lustit,
- 60 gudea gimeinun: niuse de motti,  
hwerdar sih hiutu der hregilo rumen muotti,  
erdo desero brunnono bedero uualtan.”  
do lettun se aerist asckim scritan,  
scarpes scurim: dat in dem sciltim stont.
- 65 do stoptun to samane staim bort chcludun,  
heuwun harmlicco huitte scilti,  
unti im iro lintun luttulo wurtun,  
giwigan miti wabnum .....

This I have heard tell,  
that warriors once met,  
Hildebrand and Hadubrand, between two armies.  
Father and son made ready their gear.  
They prepared their battledress, girded on their swords,  
the fighting-men, over ring-mail, when they rode out to the fight.  
Hildebrand son of Heribrand spoke; he was the senior man,  
more experienced in life: he began to ask  
with few words, who his father might be  
in the host of men, .....

..... “or of what family you are.  
If you tell me one, I shall know the others,  
youth, in the kingdom; all the great people are known to me.”  
Hadubrand son of Hildebrand spoke:  
“Our people told me this,  
old and experienced men who once lived,  
that my father was called Hildebrand; I am called Hadubrand.  
Long ago he went to the East, he fled Otacher’s hatred,  
away with Dietrich and many of his warriors.  
He left behind, in the land, a young  
wife, in the dwelling, and an ungrown child,  
bereft of inheritance. He rode away to the East.  
Later, Dietrich was deprived of him,  
my father, that was thus a friendless man.  
To Otacher he was extremely hostile,  
the truest of warriors with Dietrich.  
He was always to the fore of the army; fighting was always too dear to him.  
He was known ... among brave men.  
I do not think he is still alive.”  
“I call to witness from heaven above,” said Hildebrand, “the great God,  
that hitherto you have with such a close kinsman never  
had dealings”...  
Then he unwound from his arm spiral rings,  
made of Imperial gold, which the king had given him,  
the lord of the Huns: “This, I now give you it in good favour.”  
Hadubrand son of Hildebrand spoke:  
“Gifts must be received with the spear,  
point against point. ....”

Old Hun, you are extremely crafty,  
you lure me with your words, you want to cast me down with your spear.  
Thereby are you an aged man, that you always used cunning.  
This I was told by seafarers  
to the West across the Vandal Sea, that battle took him off;  
Hildebrand son of Heribrand is dead."  
Hildebrand son of Heribrand spoke:  
"I see clearly by your armour  
that you have a good master at home,  
that you have not yet become an outcast from this kingdom."-  
Hildebrand said: "Alas, great God, a woeful fate now comes to pass.  
I wandered outside the land for sixty Summers and Winters,  
where I was always placed amongst the host of spear-throwers:  
whereas I was never touched with death at any city,  
now my own child must strike me with the sword,  
smite me with his blade, or I become his killer.  
Yet easily you can, if your courage serves you,  
win the armour from such a distinguished veteran,  
take the spoils, if you have any right to them."  
"May he be the vilest," said Hildebrand, "of Eastern men,  
who now denies you battle, since you desire it so much,  
joint combat: let him try who will,  
which of us today shall boast the harnesses,  
and be the master of both hauberks."  
Then they first let fly with ashen spears,  
sharp hailstorms; these stuck in the shields.  
Then they strode together, battle-boards echoed,  
they struck the white shields fiercely,  
until their linden-bucklers became small,  
beaten by weapons .....