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The Nibelungenlied. The Penguin Classics. Founder Editor(1944-64)
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Appendix 4

The Genesis of the Poem

p. 370 "More is known about the evolution of the Nibelungenlied than about that of any other great heroic epic, so that in this respect the study of our poem is exemplary. If classical scholars knew as much about the prior stages of the Iliad as is known about those of the Nibelungenlied, the question who or what was 'Homer' would be largely settled, and the Higher Critic could lie down with the Unitarian. The reason why the Nibelungenlied enjoys this favoured position is, of course, that anterior sources of a historical or near-historical nature exist, and also parallel versions and allusions of archaic stamp.



These sources fall into the following classes:

- a. Latin laws and chronicles from the 6th Cent onwards
- b. a 10th cent. or perhaps 9th cent. Latin epic
- c. lays on the Death of Sigurd recorded in the 13th cent. Edda but composed some hundreds of years earlier, together with cyclically associated Eddic lays, etc.....
- d. the 13th cent. prose Thidrekssaga, a conflated compilation of the legendary life and deeds of Thidrek
- e. an invaluable passing reference to an oral version of the Nibelung story in a 'historical' author writing in Latin
- f. some passing references to characters or background of Old Eng. heroic poetry
- g. later medieval German, Danish, and Faroese poems, songs, or ballads from the 13th cent until recent times.

p. 384 The question how the foregoing sources are interrelated, and how the Nibelung story grew and ramified, naturally determine each other. But they are vexed by the absence of important stages of growth, both in the set form of poems, whether oral or written, and also, it must be conceded, in the looser form of legend.

. of the two possible ways of furnishing the key to this material - the ascent of the lost original sources through analysis, or descent from them to the surviving texts - the latter is obviously to be preferred here, since it allows of a minimum of argument

p. 385. the prime source of the Nibelung legend was a historical event. At some time during the 5th or 6th centuries, using historical memories already enshrined in heroic lays, a poet composed a lay on the destruction of the royal house of Burgundy and the death of Attila in revenge. . . .

p. 386 At another time, presumably later in the 6th cent and again in Northern Burgundy, a poet made a lay on the wooing of Burnhild and the death of 'Sigifrid'. Whether or not the family into which 'Sigifrid' had married was originally the royal Burgundian family is not susceptible to proof. In other words, this 2nd lay was originally or subsequently associated with the first lay in a 'cyclic' sense, as often happens during the growth of oral literature. This cyclic association, however, generated a tension between the two lays which . . . was not fully composed even by the deliberate attempt of our Austrian poet to harmonize the two plots

p. 387 'Sigifrid' appears above in inverted commas because it cannot be