

## 11. Statements about the background of the Nibelungenlied.

Vries, Jan De, Heroic Song and Heroic Legend (London: Oxford) 1963

p. 61 . . . the Nibelungenlied. It reaches far back into the past. A whole chain of poems, which came into being and were lost again in the course of the centuries, link the Austrian epic from the beginning of the thirteenth century with its underlying facts, which belong to the time of Attila. . . .

p. 63 Two kinds of material, two styles, two ages, clash violently in the Nibelungenlied. Was it the poet's lack of ability, or was it perhaps a well-considered plan? . . . The almost brazen contrast between the heroism of the fifth century and the courtly life of the thirteenth cannot have escaped the poet. If he did not avoid this, or at least did not soften it, then he must have wished it thus. . . .

p. 64 Two worlds, then, are seen beside, if not opposite, each other. One of Worms and Etzel's stronghold in the sphere of the Migration period; the second of about the year 1200. (Added to this is ) a mythical realm that seems to belong to the remotest past. Three worlds, therefore, which are continually overlapping, and, by doing so, shed all the more light on one another. . . .

p. 67 We need only think of the years in which the epic was written, the reign of Philip of Swabia. The struggle between Guelphs and Ghibellines had flared up again in all its violence. Although officially elected in 1201, Philip still had to contest his real power against the Guelph Otto IV of Brunswick, the son of Henry the Lion. The coronation could not take place in Aachen till 1205. On 1206 Otto's army was definitely defeated.

One wonders if the murder of the emperor in Bamberg in 1208 is reflected in the epic. . . .

p. 68 Suffice it to stress that this poem did not originate by accident, but that the time cried out for it and found the poet who was able to illustrate the essential problems of the period.

p. 197 The Migration period was telescoped so that the figures came to lie in one plane. Ermanaric, Attila, and Theoderic became contemporaries, and their relative positions no longer accorded with actual history! The Nibelungenlied shows us Dietrich of Bern, the poetic name of Theoderic of Verona, at the court of Attila at the time of the tragedy of the Burgundian princes, although they are almost a century apart. What is even more remarkable is that Theoderic sought refuge with Attila because he was driven from his kingdom in Italy by Ermanaric, who, in fact, lived a century and a half earlier.

Now we are inclined to attribute this historical confusion to an epic tradition which preserved only vague memories of the actual events and was not greatly concerned with them. But there is also another reason to be considered. In those days the means of communication were extremely poor: it could take a long time before an event became known to other nations. Therefore it sometimes happened that an earlier fact became known later than another - which had happened later but nearer to hand. This was only natural in the early Middle Ages, but even in our days of quick communications such confusions do occur.

p. 208 Andreas Heusler . . . once expressed it as follows: 'The heroic songs drew upon history, upon personal life, upon personal invention, and upon subject-matter at hand.'<sup>1</sup> This is a striking summing up of the activity of the great poets which crowned and at the same time ended the long tradition of heroic song. This applies to Homer, to Turoldus, and to the unknown poet of the Nibelungenlied.