

The Etymology of the Name *Hagen* in the *Nibelungenlied*

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THE HARSH, GRIM CHARACTER OF HAGEN in the *Nibelungenlied* (NL), who in his unswerving loyalty and steadfastness seems to many the very embodiment of the old Germanic ethic, has long been a puzzle to scholars. While in the NL he is pictured simply as the vassal of Gunther, in the Eddic sources he appears under the name *Högni* as the brother of *Gunnar* (the Norse form of *Gunther*). However, in the *Thidrekssaga* (Ths), generally considered to be derived either from the same source as the NL, or one close to it, *Högni* is depicted as the bastard brother of *Gunnar*, begotten of his mother by a supernatural being, an *álfr*.¹ A comparison of these three variants seems to indicate that the Ths version is the more original one. The fact that the name *Hagen* does not alliterate with the names of the three kings is strong evidence that the position of full brother is a developed one. On the other hand, his influential position indicates a status little below that of the three brothers, and the development from 'bastard half-brother' to 'full brother' on the one hand and to 'vassal' on the other is quite logical.

While the Burgundian kings are based on historical personages — the names *Gibica* (= *Gjúki*, father of *Gunnar* in the Eddic sources), *Gundomaris* (= ON *Gutthormr*), *Gislaharius* (= *Giselher*) and *Gundaharius* (= *Gunther*) appear as Burgundian kings of the 4th–5th centuries in Gundobad's *Lex Burgundionum*, issued about the year 500² —, no historical record of *Hagen* has ever been discovered.

¹ In the NL *Gunther* has two brothers, *Giselher* and *Gernôt*. In the Eddic sources the only brother named beside *Högni* is called *Gutthormr*, but in the *Sigurðarkviða in skamma* a fourth brother is mentioned, but not named (strophe 19). In the Ths *Gunnar*'s full brothers are called *Gernoz* and *Gisler*, while at one point a fourth one, called *Gutthormr*, is mentioned. — References to the *Edda* are to *Edda*, hrsg. v. Gustav Neckel (Heidelberg, 1914); those to the Ths to *Saga Þiðriks Konungs af Bern*, udgivet af C. R. Unger (Christiania, 1853.)

² *Lex. Burg.* 3 (MGH, LL I, II, 1, 43).

The phrase *von Tronege* that so often appears with his name in the NL has caused some scholars to postulate a historical character from any of various localities in the Rhineland area that have names reminiscent of *Tronege*, while others have sought to find the answer in the legend (first mentioned by Fredegar³) that the Franks were of Trojan origin.⁴ It is not even possible to say with any certainty whether the character of Hagen had its origin in Franco-Burgundian legendary history, or whether it was of mythological origin, an inherent part of the Siegfried legend at first.

Apart from the Nibelung sources, Hagen also appears as a character in the 10th-century Latin epic *Waltharius* (based on German legend, and probably a translation of a German original). He (named *Hagano* here) is portrayed as a Frank, the son of Hagathie, and is a hostage among the Huns, along with Gunther (Gundarius). *Hagen* is also the name of the father of Hilde in the Hilde and Hetel legend that appears in three works of the early 13th century: the Middle High German folk epic *Kûdrûn*, the Icelandic prose *Edda* of Snorri Sturluson,⁵ and the Latin chronicle of the Dane Saxo Grammaticus.⁶

The name *Hagen* is as mysterious as the person who bore it in the NL, and any number of attempts have been made to etymologize it, none of them very satisfactory.

One group consists of endeavors to link the name with those of various historical personages. Perhaps the best attempt along these lines is the effort to identify Hagen with Aëtius, the victor of the Catalaunian Fields (whose name is attested also in the forms *Age-tius*, *Agitius*, *Aegidius*) through Hagathie, the father of Hagano in the *Waltharius*, where the name occurs only in the accusative

³ *Chronicarum quae dicuntur Fredegarii Scholastici Libri IV cum continuationibus*, edidit Bruno Krusch (*MGH, Script. Rer. Merov.* II, 1888), II, 4–8 and III, 2. Cf. *The Fourth Book of the Chronicle of Fredegar with its Continuations*, trans. by J. M. Wallace Hadrill (London, 1960), xi–xii.

⁴ Cf. Friedrich Panzer, *Das Nibelungenlied: Entstehung und Gestalt* (Stuttgart, 1955), 313–14, and M. Sonnenfeld, "An etymological explanation of the Hagen figure," *Neophilologus* 43 (1959), 300–301.

⁵ *Edda Snorra Sturlusonar*, udgivet af Finnur Jónsson (København, 1931), *Skáldskaparmál*, chap. 62.

⁶ *Saxonis Gesta Danorum* primum a C. Knabe & P. Herrmann recensita, recognoverunt et ediderunt J. Olrik & H. Raeder. Tomus I Textum continens (Hau-niae, 1931), Liber V, VII, 8ff.

Hagathien (v. 629).⁷ H. Grégoire,⁸ retaining the equation Aëtius = Hagathie, identified Hagano with Echoar-Goar, leader of the Alani, and sought to derive Hagen's name from the designation for 'ruler' (represented by Turkish *han*, English *khan*) in a form *chagan*. The equation of Aëtius and Hagen, apart from the forced phonetic combinations that must be made, is unlikely by the very fact that Aëtius was historically an enemy of the Burgundians.⁹ F. R. Schröder points out that the presence of the name *Hagen* in the Hetel and Hilde legend is against its provenience from an Oriental language.¹⁰ Also, K. F. Stroheker¹¹ maintains with justification that a leader of the Alani, of Sarmatian-Iranian stock, would hardly bear an Altaic designation.

Even more far-fetched is the derivation of *Hagen* from *Eugenius*, the name of the lover of the Roman princess Honoria.¹²

Another group of etymologies centers around the element of the supernatural that is attached to Hagen's personality, especially in the Ths. Lachmann¹³ considered Hagen as the assassin of Siegfried, the counterpart of Hödr, the blind, unwitting assassin of Baldr (equated to Siegfried) in the *Edda*.¹⁴ He thus connected the name *Hagen* with OHG *hag* 'hedge, bush,' and looked upon this as a connecting link with the mistletoe with which Baldr was killed. He further notes that Hagano in the *Waltharius* is characterized as a *paliurus* 'Christ's thorn (a thorny shrub)' (1351) and as being *spinosus* (1421). However, engaging as the thought is at first, there is really no reason for equating Siegfried with Baldr, except for the motif of limited vulnerability associated with each of them. But the fact that this motif with respect to Siegfried appears only in the

⁷ Richard Heinzel, "Über die Nibelungensage," *Sitzungsberichte der Wiener Akademie der Wissenschaften, phil.-hist. Klasse*, 109 (2) (1885), 671-718. — *Waltharius* references are to *Waltharius*, hrsg. v. Karl Strecker (Berlin, 1947).

⁸ "Où en est la question des Nibelungen?," *Byzantion* 10 (1935), 227 ff., 241 ff.

⁹ Cf. Otto L. Jiriczek, *Die deutsche Heldensage*^A (*Sammlung Göschen*, Bd. 33. Berlin, 1913), 88.

¹⁰ "Die Sage von Hetel und Hilde," *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte*, 32 (1958), 54.

¹¹ "Historisch-geographische Grundlagen der Nibelungendichtung," *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift*, 32 (1958), 221.

¹² Cf. N. Lukman, "The Catalaunian Battles in Medieval Epics," *Classica et Mediaevalia* 10 (1948), 60-131.

¹³ *Zu den Nibelungen und zu der Klage* (Berlin, 1836), 344 ff.

¹⁴ Völs. 31-32. Cf. Snorri's *Edda*, Gylfaginning, chap. 33.

NL — *i.e.*, not in the Norse material, even the Ths, that is so close to the NL — seems to indicate that it is a later addendum in the German versions. And if Hagen were named after such an attribute, it would seem that the reference would be more specific, namely 'he of the mistletoe,' or something on that order. For Baldr was not killed by just any thorny wood, but from an arrow fashioned from the wood of the sacred mistletoe. In all probability *paliurus* and *spinosus* in the *Waltharius* were simply puns on the name *Hagano*, which the author had interpreted as being connected with OHG *hag* and *hagan*.

Rudolf Koegel¹⁵ saw in the name the meaning 'shadowy one,' 'ghostly one,' which he arrived at by analogy with the OHG name *Hagupart*, lit., 'popanz, larve.'¹⁶ Because in the synonymous expression *schembart* the first element is OHG *scema* 'shadow,' Koegel asserts the first element of *Hagupart* must have the same meaning. But this does not necessarily follow — a logical connection could be made, for example, with the stem of *hag* 'bush.' Moreover, Koegel's further etymological connections are quite dubious.

Another attempt in the mythological sphere was that of W. Müller, who connected the name with MHG *hage(n)* 'breeding bull,' and wished to identify Hagen with the bull-headed god of the Franks known as *Chlojo bisinus*.¹⁷ Going out from the same etymon, F. R. Schröder¹⁸ made a series of combinations as clever as they are unlikely that end up with the identification of Hagen as the boar that appears in the hunt that prefaces Siegfried's death in the NL and the Ths. To accomplish this he equated Siegfried with the youthful vegetation god who is overcome in many religions by a demon who often appears in the form of a boar. Then, pointing to the fact that breeding designations for domestic animals often shift from one animal to another, he cited as evidence for the meaning 'boar' in German the Swabian *häckel* 'Zucht-Eber.' His final point of evidence are the words of Grímhildr in the Ths: after Högni says that Sigurðr had died from goring by a boar, she says, "Högni, you were that boar!" (*Sa sami villigauiltr hæfir þu verit Haugni.*) (chap. 348). The

¹⁵ *Geschichte der deutschen Litteratur bis zum Ausgange des Mittelalters* (Strassburg, 1897), I, 2, 208–209.

¹⁶ E. Förstemann, *Alteutsches Namenbuch* (Nordhausen, 1856), I, 575.

¹⁷ *Mythologie der deutschen Heldensage* (Heilbronn, 1886), 45.

¹⁸ "Sigfrids Tod," *GRM* 41 (1960), 119–21.

chain of evidence has too many weak links: It is by no means certain that the proto-Siegfried was a vegetation god, nor that Hagen is of mythological origin, or even that he was originally associated with Siegfried rather than with the Burgundian kings; the evidence that Siegfried was ever killed by the boar is very dubious indeed in the Nibelung sources — Grímhildr's remark is easily explained as the obvious answer to Högni's patent lie; there is no evidence from the OHG or MHG periods that *hage* ever meant 'boar' — indeed, the Swabian dialect *häckel* could easily be of different origin.

Various other attempts have been made to explain the name on a rational basis as an ordinary name for a warrior. K. Müllenhoff¹⁹ would link the word up with ON *hagr* 'skillful,'²⁰ wherein he is followed by Kralik.²¹ Müllenhoff also would connect OHG *hagustalt* (NHG *hagestolz*), which he defines as having a basic meaning of 'warrior,' with the same etymon.

Others besides Lachmann have sought to derive *Hagen* from the etymon represented by NHG *hag* 'bush, hedge, etc.' Gustav Freytag, pointing to the use of hedges as fences already in prehistoric times among the Germanic peoples, wanted to give the name the meaning 'guardian of the borderlands.'²² F. Panzer thought it was a shortened form of names like *Haganrik*, *Haganulf*, compounds made from OHG *hagan* 'thornbush.'²³

Although *hag* is poorly attested in OHG, being represented in Graff only by one gloss, 'urbs,'²⁴ and by the compound *hagastalt*, *hagustalt*,²⁵ and in Förstemann by a few compound names,²⁶ it is well attested in Middle High German in meanings that appear to be very old, so that its absence in the older period is surely only fortuitous. It is common in the MHG period in the meanings 'bush,' 'fence,' 'enclosure,' "die waldige streeke . . . in der das unterholz vorherrscht, obschon es in einzelnen fällen ganz an den begriff *wald* rührt."²⁷ The DWb gives a further sense (4) which it defines as follows:

¹⁹ "Zeugnisse und Excursus zur deutschen Heldensage," *ZsfJA* 12 (1865), 296 to 299. ²⁰ Cf. Fritzner. 1. 690.

²¹ *Die Sigfridtrilogie im Nibelungenlied und in der Thidrekssaga* (Halle, 1941), 239.

²² *Gesammelte Aufsätze* (Leipzig, 1888), 2. 436.

²³ *Op. cit.*, 313.

²⁴ 4. 761.

²⁵ 4. 762.

²⁶ 2. 626.

²⁷ DWb IV, 2, 138–39. Cf. Lexer 1. 1136–37 and Benecke-Müller-Zarncke 1. 605–606.

hag geht nun auch über aus der bedeutung des umziehenden gehes auf den umzogenen ort selbst, mag er nun ein einziges gebäude, ein landgut, ein ganzer ort sein; nur bezeichnet *hag* nie den eigentlichen herrnsitz, das hauptgut und den wohnplatz des besitzers eines terrains, welcher sitz vielmehr stets hof, sal ... heiszt.

Going out from this latter meaning, Sonnenfeld²⁸ postulates a meaning similar to that of *hagastalt*, *hagustalt*, namely, 'one associated with or administering a *hag*, or subordinate estate,' a rôle befitting Hagen as the younger brother. As evidence the same author points to the word *haukstaldr* in the *Edda*,²⁹ which has been emended by many editors to *högstaldr*. At this point Gunnar is called *gramr haukstalda*, which Sonnenfeld interprets as meaning 'lord of younger sons of land owners,' so that presumably all of Gunnar's brothers bear the same designation. We would thus have to assume that *Högni* is synonymous with *högstaldr* (for which there is no evidence), and that the title which was given to three brothers came to be looked upon as a proper name for one of them. Sonnenfeld feels that many of the inconsistencies in Hagen's character are due to his being in actuality the end product of a fusion of the three brothers. This seems hardly likely, especially when one considers that the "complex character" of Hagen is something that appears only in the NL and is due probably not to the fusion of three brothers, but rather to the fusion of different layers of story tradition.

It does seem that *hag* 'bush, etc.,' is the best point of departure for explaining the name. There is, moreover, a method of combining an explanation of the use of this etymon with Hagen's special nature that seems to have been hitherto overlooked. All the etymological explanations that depend on the circumstances of Hagen's birth are concerned with the supernatural quality of his sire, yet surely the fact of his bastardry is equally important: indeed, if one assumes a human, non-supernatural origin for the personality of Hagen, it would be best to go out from the idea of a bastard half-brother. The question then is whether we can with any plausibility construe a meaning 'bastard' for the name.

Now, in terms meaning 'bastard' or in allusions to bastardry the stress is often put upon the fact that the conception took place not

²⁸ *Op.cit.*, 302-303.

²⁹ *Sigurdarkviða in skamma*, 31.

in the connubial bed, as is fitting and proper, but somewhere else. Thus the German word *bankert* 'bastard' (and the variant constructions *bänking*, *bankkind*, *bankriese*) seems to be a derivative of *bank* 'bench' and to have originally meant 'one begotten on a bench.'³⁰ ON *hornungr* 'bastard' is a derivative of *horn* 'corner' and means literally 'one begotten in a corner.'³¹ The word *bastard* itself, although its exact etymology is obscure, seems to be of similar origin.³²

If we take as our starting point the DWb's sense 4 of *hag*, 'tract covered with brush,' 'forest of undergrowth,' we thus arrive at a literal meaning for *Hagen* of 'one begotten in the brush,' to which as a designation for 'bastard' there can be no objections on semantic grounds. The more extensive description of Högni's procreation in the *Ths* (chap. 169), where Högni's mother is depicted as lying outside in her garden (*grasgarðr*), gives further support to this derivation.

We must then assume that the name of Hagano in the *Waltharius*, along with that of Gundarius, came into the Walter legend from the Nibelung legend. The Hagen of the Hetel and Hilde legend could be explained on the same basis, or on the assumption of an earlier version in which this Hagen is of obscure birth. Could we look upon the scene in *Kúdrân* where Hagen appears out of nowhere to save the maidens from the griffins, as a reflex of this tradition?³³ The use of *Haguno*, *Hagano*, *Hagono* as a personal name in Old High German times³⁴ would not necessarily be a reflection upon the birth of these individuals, but could just as well be explained as imitative of the name of the legendary character (no longer understood in its literal meaning): Koegel³⁵ gives examples of other names derived from those of legendary characters.

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³⁰ See DWb and Kluge-Götze-Mitzka s.v.

³¹ See Fritzner s.v.

³² Juan Corominas, *Diccionario crítico etimológico de la lengua castellana* (Bern, 1954 ff.), I, 421, says, "Los más están de acuerdo en que deriva de un sustantivo que indicaría el lugar donde fué engendrado el bastardo." He there cites other Romance parallels.

³³ *Kudrun*, hrsg. v. B. Symons (Halle, 1883), strophe 73 ff. Cf. also the epithets that he bears in *Kúdrân*: *der wilde*, *der küene*, *der válant aller küenege*, which likewise point to a similar origin — see Gustav Ehrismann, *Geschichte der deutschen Literatur bis zum Ausgang des Mittelalters* (München, 1932–1935), 2, 2, 150.

³⁴ Müllenhoff, *loc. cit.*

³⁵ *Loc. cit.*