

Sunufatarungo

By Isolde de Lengadoc

Introduction:

“Sunufatarungo” is an Old High German (OHG) word meaning “father and son.” It appears in the third line of “The Hildebrandslied”¹ (and apparently nowhere else in the tiny corpus of OHG literature), an epic poem first transcribed in Fulda around 830 CE.² This epic is the story of a father and son who were separated when the son was very young, and who are reunited as enemies on the battlefield.

These extant plot details (the ending is missing)³ and the unity symbolized by combining father and son into one word struck a chord with me as the child of blended families and now a stepmother myself. The situations that I’ve experienced are not nearly as fraught as “The Hildebrandslied,” in fact they’ve been very supportive and nurturing. There are always, however, strong feelings of both loss and devotion involved when a young child is separated from a parent. Reading “The Hildebrandslied,” I realized that these feelings, which I had attributed only to the divorce-riddled modern age, are in fact universals. Although the plot of “The Hildebrandslied” is extreme, the practice of fostering in many ways mirrors the modern reality of blended families living in different states.⁴

Given my inspiration, I attempted to compose a song that would express these timeless feelings in a manner in keeping with OHG literature and “The Hildebrandslied.” Very little is known about OHG literature – less than 200 lines of alliterative verse remain in OHG.⁵ During the period of OHG (750-1050 CE),⁶ German was just beginning to assert itself as a literary language. Original literature was often composed in Latin, and what little was recorded in OHG reflects what was undoubtedly a rich and ancient oral tradition.⁷ Because of this, my strategy has been to be faithful to the details that are available from the OHG corpus, and to fill in the gaps, when necessary, with literary practices from its sister languages, mostly Old English (OE), and with iconographical data pertaining to music from adjacent geographical regions.

¹ Krogmann, Willy. *Das Hildebrandslied In der langobardischen Ufrassung hergestellt*. Berlin: Erich Schmidt Verlag, 1959. p 46.

² Walter, James K. *German Epic Poetry*. New York: Continuum, 1995. p 1.

³ Bostock, J. Knight. *A Handbook on Old High German Literature*. Oxford: Clarendon press, 1955. p 33.

⁴ Fostering was a practice common throughout Europe during and after the middle ages, whereby a child at a certain age would go to live with another family, either to further his education or solidify alliances or family ties. This practice is mentioned in the Middle High German epic *Kudrun* – see page 85 of Ann Marie Ramussen’s *Mothers and Daughters in Medieval German Literature* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1997).

⁵ Perusing the impressive collection of OHG texts (with fascimiles) of Bibliotheca Augustana will give an idea of what little remains of recorded OHG literature. Most of the remaining OHG texts are biblical translations. See http://www.hs-augsburg.de/~harsch/germanica/Chronologie/d_chrono.html

⁶ The Bibliotheca Augustana contains a breakdown of texts by linguistic period.

⁷ Bostock, 2.

Text:

Although “The Hildebrandslied” is an epic narrative poem, mine is a lyric poem. Medieval Germanic poetry (Norse, Old English, German, etc) is dominated by epic narrative plots, yet there are examples of lyric poetry to be found. Whereas epic poetry relates a narrative, the OE “Wulf and Eadwacer” is an undeniably lyric poem in that it describes a situation and a set of emotions, not a series of events.⁸ Given that epic poetry has the potential to unite and define a people, whereas lyric poetry evokes a more personal experience, it stands to reason that more epic poetry has survived from this period than lyric poetry. I consider it a relatively safe assumption that lyric poetry did exist in the OHG oral tradition, even if it did not survive in written form.

“The Hildebrandslied” is written in a style of alliterative verse similar to other examples of OHG epic poetry.⁹ In broad terms, it is similar to the OE alliterative verse form, found in works such as “Wulf and Eadwacer” and “Beowulf.” Each line consists of two half-lines, or “hemistiches.” The first hemistich (A) includes two alliterating heavy stresses, or “lifts,” and the second (B) includes one, which alliterates with the first two.¹⁰ These lifts need not be the only stressed syllables in the hemistich, but they will be the most prominent. Exact syllable count and the pattern of stresses within a line are not important, but faithful adherence to the rules governing the number of lifts in each hemistich will result in lines of roughly uniform length.

Specifically, however, the OHG form of alliterative poetry found in “The Hildebrandslied” differs slightly from the OE form in a way which, I found, lent itself to much more fluid and natural-sounding modern English. Lines are longer in OHG poetry than they are in OE poetry, due in large part to the relative frequency of unstressed function words, such as articles and prepositions. OHG verse is also less rigid with its assignment of heavy stress. Whereas nearly any grammatically important word (nouns, lexical verbs and most adjectives) will be considered a heavy stress in OE verse, adjectives and verbs are not always treated as a heavy stress in OHG verbs, and thus do not always alliterate.

Whereas the pattern of lifts is quite rigid in OE verse, it is much more fluid in “The Hildebrandslied.” This may be a literary feature, or it may be a mistake on the part of a scribe who was not quite familiar with the intricacies of the vernacular oral tradition. In any case, while lines typically follow the given pattern,¹¹ some have only one lift in A,

⁸ For an excellent translation of “Wulf and Eadwacer” see the blog of THL Teleri the Well-Prepared, of Atlantia at http://moeticae.typepad.com/mi_contra_fa/wulf-and-eadwacer.html

⁹ See, for example, *Muspili*, *Ludwigslied* and *Georgslied* for other examples of OHG poetry.

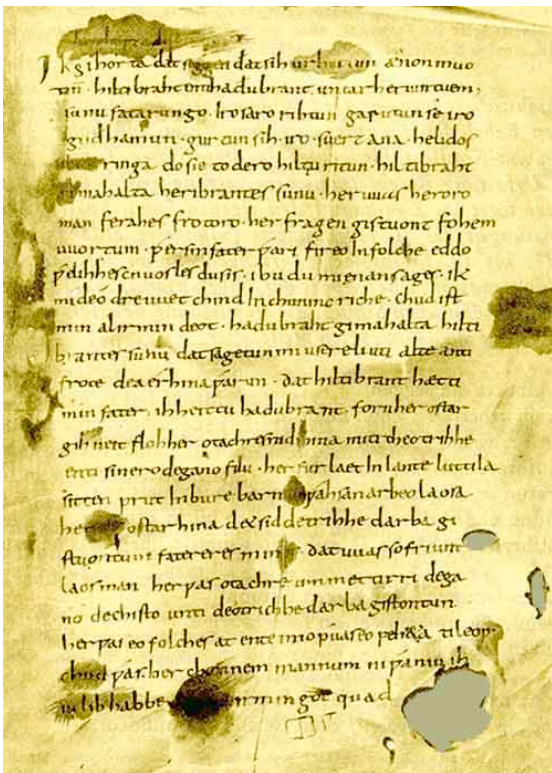
¹⁰ Some examples of OE verse include two lifts in B as well as in A (ie, “Beowulf”). These examples only requires alliteration within each hemistich, whereas in OHG poetry, the lift in the B hemistich typically alliterates with the lifts in A as well. For an excellent composition-focused overview of alliterative poetry (specifically OE), see Paul Deane’s “Linking Letters: A Poet's Guide to Alliterative Verse.”

<http://alliteration.net/fieldgd.htm>

¹¹ Line 2: *Hiltribraht enti Hadurant...untar heriun twem,*

and one in B.¹² Some have what seems to be alliteration of dips (unstressed sections) as well as lifts on different letters in A, with corresponding alliteration in B.¹³ Some lines have no alliteration whatsoever.¹⁴ Although it is impossible to know what was a feature of the literature and what was simply a mistake in transcription, I have opted to allow rare instances of A hemistiches with one lift and of alliteration on dips for effect, while maintaining the traditional pattern of two lifts in A and one in B overall. I have chosen not to include any lines with no alliteration, as I believe this is the aberration most likely to be a mistake.

It should be mentioned that alliteration is of the one or two most heavily stressed syllables of a hemistich, thus alliteration may occur in the middle of a word, and not always at the beginning. For example, in “The Hildebrandslied,” “Sunufatarungo” is its own hemistich. The stress in this word is on the fifth syllable, which alliterates with “rihtun” in the next hemistich. In English, this results in alliteration between words such as “exploding” and “pleasure,” or “concentration” and “traces.” Consonant clusters, where possible, alliterate with identical consonant clusters. This is a general tendency in OHG verse, and not a hard and fast rule, except for the cluster s+stop (stop = p,b,t,d,k and g). Therefore “stature” alliterates with “stand,” but not with “scalding,” which alliterates with “scowl.” All vowels alliterate with each other.



Strophic format, the break between verses and hemistiches, is not reflected in the OHG manuscripts themselves, but is a modern convention. We write the poetry this way in order to help us visualize its organization. “The Hildebrandslied,” however, was written in one continuous block of text (see left). In some cases, the cadence of the text signals breaks between lines and stanzas. In the case of “The Hildebrandslied,” only lines and hemistiches can be discerned, not verses. Verses have been identified in “Wulf and Eadwacer,” due in part to the presence of a refrain line, but they are of uneven length. Because “Wulf and Eadwacer” is a lyric poem, and not a long epic, I have chosen to use it as a model for the overall structure of my song, and not “The Hildebrandslied.” It is entirely possible that shorter, lyric songs in OHG might have taken a similar form – a few short, uneven verses separated by a hemistich refrain.

There is no consistent rhyme pattern present in “The Hildebrandslied,” however “The Ludwigslied,” written about 50 years after the transcription of “The

¹² Line 3: *Sunufatarungo...iro saro rihtun*

¹³ Line 8: *Fohem wortum...wer sin fater wari.*

¹⁴ Line 13: *dat sagetun mi...usere liuti*

Hildebrandslied,” is written in rhyming couplets. Hints of rhyme can also be discerned in “The Hildebrandslied.” Lines 56 and 57 end on *motti/muotti*, and lines 58 and 59 end on *waltan/scritan*. I believe this reveals a developing tendency toward rhyme that was developing in OHG during the 9th century. I suspect that the orally transmitted poem on which “The Hildebrandslied” was based was unconcerned with rhyme. In order to reflect this transitional period in OHG literature, I have not included a consistent rhyme scheme, but included some assonance at the end of the second verse, through the repetition of the word “you.” Other types of repetition are also present in “The Hildebrandslied.” Lines 40 and 41 both end with the B hemistich “*Heribrantes suno*,” and lines 43 and 44 begin with the phrase “*dat du*.”

kennings, compound-word descriptive epithets such as “ring-giver” for king or “whale-road” for sea, are one of the most recognizable features of Germanic alliterative poetry. They are practically packed into OE poetry, and I find that the imitation of this kenning saturation often results in strange, foreign-sounding English (particularly in combination with the comparatively short OE lines – one kenning can take up an entire hemistich).¹⁵ Fortunately, kennings are rare in “The Hildebrandslied” and completely absent in “The Ludwigslied.”¹⁶ This again suggests a transition away from a literary device that may have been in heavier use in the earlier oral tradition. I have included one kenning in my poem, “sky-jewel,” as a nod to a device that would have been used sparingly just before “The Hildebrandslied” was copied. I believe this yields a text that is as natural sounding in English as the OHG was to medieval Germans.

Music:

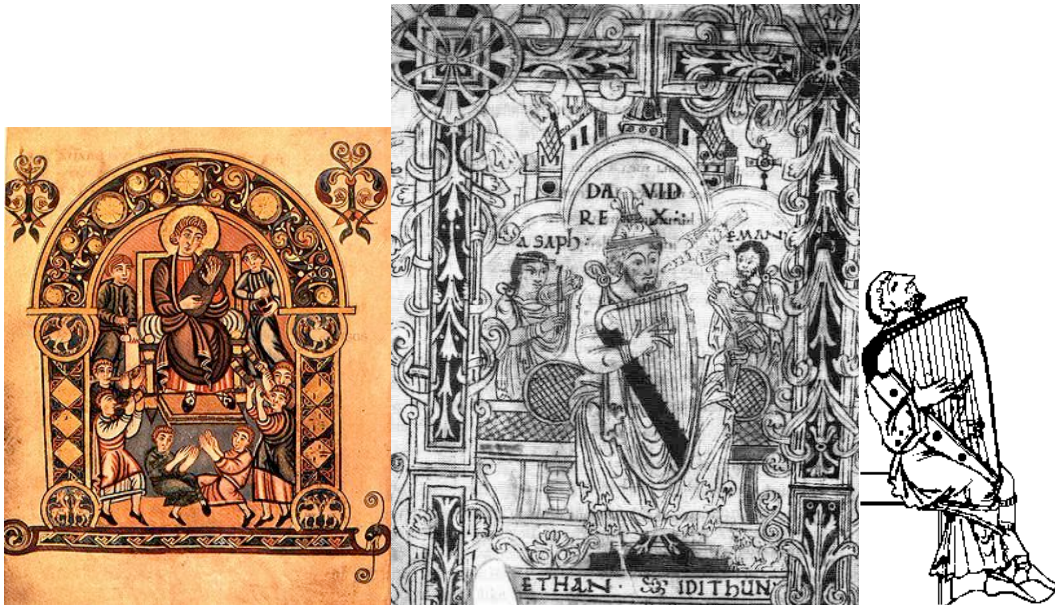
We know even less about OHG music than we do about OHG literary conventions. Much of what we do know centers around the instruments on which it was played. The “Cambridge Songs” is a manuscript copied by Anglo Saxon monks in the 11th century. It is a collection of secular songs that seems to come chiefly from the Rhineland (most are in Latin, a few are in OHG, all are text-only). Although we cannot know for sure when these songs were composed, these songs give us a glimpse into the work of a professional, secular minstrel contemporary with or just later than the scribe who wrote down “The Hildebrandslied.”¹⁷ Many of these songs sing the praises of the harp and the lyre.

Three distinct terms are used seemingly interchangeably in the manuscript (*harpa*, *lira*, *cithara*), but other archeological evidence also suggests that both harps and lyres may have been in use in Germany during the 9th century. The Winchcombe Psalter (Anglo Saxon, c.1030) depicts a harp and lyres being played together. The Vespasian Psalter (Anglo Saxon, late 8th century) depicts the lyre. Significantly, the Utrecht Psalter, a Carolingian work produced during the 9th century, places the familiar-looking frame harp on the continent with the lyre at about the time that “The Hildebrandslied” was first copied into writing.

¹⁵ Deane, <http://alliteration.net/field15.htm>

¹⁶ Bostock, 204.

¹⁷ For background regarding this manuscript and excellent musical recreations, see Sequentia’s “Lost Songs of the Rhineland Harper,” Deutschlandfunk, CD and liner notes.



Images from left to right: A lyre player from the Vespasian Psalter, King David on the harp accompanied by lyre players from the Winchcombe Psalter, a harp player from the Utrecht Psalter.

This leads me to suspect that during and just before the time that “The Hildebrandslied” was written down, the lyre was well established and the frame harp gaining in popularity. This provides a workable framework in which to compose music appropriate to OHG verse. The structure of the lyre leads many scholars to believe that melodic notes were played for ornamentation of a sung melody while a single drone note sounded throughout the piece. I have tried to compose the instrumental accompaniment to my song in the mindset of a culture transitioning from the 6-note lyre to the 12 or 14 note frame harp. I have incorporated a drone on the tonic, which would have been familiar to lyre players, and chords in certain other parts for emphasis. I have also incorporated through most of the song a drone on the 5th, and chord work that would have been outside the range of a lyre player. In this way, I have attempted to mimic the compositional style of a lyre player experimenting with a new instrument with a larger range. My harp has 22 strings, far more than the harps in early period iconography, and I use the lower 15 in my piece.

Extant melodies, admittedly mostly liturgical, suggest that dorian was a popular mode in which to write melodies (for reference, “Eleanor Rigby,” by the Beatles, is in dorian).¹⁸ I have written my melody in C dorian. As my song is secular and alliterative (church music was not written in alliterative verse), I have taken some steps to distance my melody from the chant-sounding melodies of church music. Although I have included some of the melismatic elements of liturgical melodies (multiple notes in one syllable), which I think are characteristic of the era, and not of the church, I avoid staying on any one note for too long. I also avoid the chant-like pattern of starting at the tonic, raising to the 5th and then returning to the tonic – I more often begin at the fifth, and then drift toward the tonic at the end of a verse.

¹⁸ THL Teleri the Well-Prepared. “Anglo-Saxon Poetry and Performance.” Winter Atlantian University, no. 73, AS XLIII (February 2009).