

**THE NIBELUNGENLIED,
TRANSLATED INTO RHYMED
ENGLISH VERSE IN THE
METRE OF THE ORIGINAL**

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George Henry Needler

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GEORGE HENRY NEEDLER

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Metre of the Original*

BY

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PREFACE

THIS translation of the Nibelungenlied is published with the simple purpose of placing one of the world's great epic poems within the reach of English readers. Translations are at best but poor substitutes for originals. A new translation of a poem implies also a criticism of those that have preceded it. My apology for presenting this new English version of the Nibelungenlied is that none of those hitherto made has reproduced the metrical form of the original. In the hope of making the outlines of the poem clearer for the modern reader, I have endeavored to supply in the Introduction a historical background by summing up the results of investigation into its origin and growth. The translation itself was begun many years ago, when I studied the original under Zarncke in Leipzig.

G. H. N.

UNIVERSITY COLLEGE, TORONTO,
September, 1904.

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THE NIBELUNGENLIED

I. THE NIBELUNGEN SAGA

I. ORIGIN OF THE SAGA

ALL the Aryan peoples have had their heroic age, the achievements of which form the basis of later saga. For the Germans this was the period of the Migrations, as it is called, in round numbers the two hundred years from 400 to 600, at the close of which we find them settled in those regions which they have, generally speaking, occupied ever since. During these two centuries kaleidoscopic changes had been taking place in the position of the various Germanic tribes. Impelled partly by a native love of wandering, partly by the pressure of hostile peoples of other race, they moved with astonishing rapidity hither and thither over the face of Europe, generally in conflict with one another or buffeted by the Romans in the west and south, and by the Huns in the east. In this stern struggle for existence and search for a permanent place of settlement some of them even perished utterly; amid the changing fortunes of all of them deeds were performed that fixed themselves in the memory of the whole people, great victories or great disasters became the subject of story and song. We need only to recall such names as those of Ermanric and Theodoric to remind ourselves what an important part was played by the Germanic peoples of that Migration Period in the history of Europe. During it a national consciousness was engendered, and in it we have the faint beginnings of a national literature. Germanic saga rests almost entirely upon the events of these two centuries, the fifth and sixth. Although we get glimpses of the Germans during the four or five preceding centuries, none of the historic characters of those earlier times have been preserved in the national sagas.

With these sagas based on history, however, have been mingled

in most cases primeval Germanic myths, possessions of the people from prehistoric times. A most conspicuous example of this union of mythical and originally historical elements is the Nibelungen saga, out of which grew in course of time the great national epic, the Nibelungenlied.

The Nibelungen saga is made up of two parts, on the one hand the mythical story of Siegfried and on the other the story, founded on historic fact, of the Burgundians. When and how the Siegfried myth arose it is impossible to say; its origin takes us back into the impenetrable mists of the unrecorded life of our Germanic forefathers, and its form was moulded by the popular poetic spirit. The other part of the saga is based upon the historic incident of the overthrow of the Burgundian kingdom by the Huns in the year 437. This annihilation of a whole tribe naturally impressed itself vividly upon the imagination of contemporaries. Then the fact of history soon began to pass over into the realm of legend, and, from causes which can no longer be determined, this tradition of the vanished Burgundians became united with the mythical story of Siegfried. This composite Siegfried-Burgundian saga then became a common possession of the Germanic peoples, was borne with many of them to lands far distant from the place of its origin, and was further moulded by each according to its peculiar genius and surroundings. In the Icelandic Eddas, the oldest of which we have as they were written down in the latter part of the ninth century, are preserved the earliest records of the form it had taken among the northern Germanic peoples. Our Nibelungenlied, which is the chief source of our knowledge of the story as it developed in Germany, dates from about the year 1200. These two versions, the Northern and the German, though originating in this common source, had diverged very widely in the centuries that elapsed between their beginning and the time when the manuscripts were written in which they are preserved. Each curtailed, re-arranged, or enlarged the incidents of the story in its own way. The character of the chief actors and the motives underlying what we may call the dramatic development assumed widely dissimilar forms. The German Nibelungenlied may be read and appreciated as one of the world's great epic poems without an acquaintance

on the part of the reader with the Northern version of the saga. In order, however, to furnish the setting for a few episodes that would in that case remain either obscure or colorless, and with a view to placing the readers of this translation in a position to judge better the deeper significance of the epic as the eloquent narrative of a thousand years of the life of the people among whom it grew, the broad outlines of the saga in its Northern form will be given here.

2. THE NORTHERN FORM OF THE SAGA

Starting at the middle of the fifth century from the territory about Worms on the Rhine where the Burgundians were overthrown, the saga soon spread from the Franks to the other Germanic peoples. We have evidence of its presence in northern Germany and Denmark. Allusions to it in the Anglo-Saxon poem, the *Wanderer*, of the seventh century and in the great Anglo-Saxon epic *Beowulf* of a short time later, show us that it had early become part of the national saga stock in England. Among the people of Norway and Iceland it took root and grew with particular vigor. Here, farthest away from its original home and least exposed to outward influences, it preserved on the whole most fully its heathen Germanic character, especially in its mythical part. By a fortunate turn of events, too, the written record of it here is of considerably earlier date than that which we have from Germany. The Eddas, as the extensive collection of early Icelandic poems is called, are the fullest record of Germanic mythology and saga that has been handed down to us, and in them the saga of Siegfried and the Nibelungen looms up prominently. The earliest of these poems date from about the year 850, and the most important of them were probably written down within a couple of centuries of that time. They are thus in part some three centuries older than the German Nibelungenlied, and on the whole, too, they preserve more of the original outlines of the saga. By bringing together the various episodes of the saga from the Eddas and the Volsung saga, a prose account of the mythical race of the Volsungs, we arrive at the following narrative.

On their wanderings through the world the three gods Odin,