

The Ambraser Heldenbuch – A Major Compilation of Middle High German Narrative Poetry for Posterity Habsburg, German, or Austrian?

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In light of many attempts by recent scholars to come to terms with national concepts of literature, it is amazing to notice that even medieval and late medieval German literature is suddenly functionalized to support ideological, political purposes, so it seems. One of the major cultural-historical objects commonly referred to as the first major indicator of Austrian cultural identity was the famous Ambraser Heldenbuch, written by Hans Ried in Innsbruck on behalf of Emperor Maximilian I. After a critical review of a variety of approaches to the history of 'Austrian' medieval literature, this study examines closely what we can learn from the Ambraser Heldenbuch with regard to such a national reading of 'Austrian' in literary-historical terms.

Introduction: Austrian Literature?

Today, perhaps more than in the past, there are strong efforts to determine Austrian literature as a cultural-historical entity *sui generis*, that is, all by itself, representing Austrian culture and identity, as if politics and literature played the same role. It might be difficult to determine 'Austrian' more in detail, but we would probably not go wrong in claiming specific differences between German and Austrian and Swiss literature, at least today. Even linguistically, Austrian as a language is indeed somewhat different from German, but the overall language system is the same as German in Germany or in Switzerland, both today and in the past.¹ However, each region in the German-speaking world has produced its own dialect and accent, which finds vivid expression now in Peter Pabisch's six-volume study and anthology.² Yet this means that, in most cases, we are regularly forced to acknowledge simply a linguistic variant spoken and written in a smaller or larger region.

Literature produced in Munich and its wider radius proves to be different

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1. Peter Wiesinger (Ed.), *Das österreichische Deutsch* (Vienna: Böhlau, 1988); but see now the contributions to Heinz Sieburg, and Hans-Joachim Solms (Ed.), *Das Deutsche als plurizentrische Sprache: Ansprüche – Ergebnisse – Perspektiven* (Berlin: Erich Schmidt Verlag, 2017). For the pan-European perspective, see Eva Gugenberger, *Vielsprachiges Europa: zur Situation der regionalen Sprachen von der Iberischen Halbinsel bis zum Kaukasus* (Frankfurt a. M.: Peter Lang, 2003). For a useful summary of Austrian German, see: https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/%C3%96sterreichisches_Deutsch. [Accessed 11 September 2021].

2. Peter Pabisch, *Geschichte der deutschsprachigen Dialektliteratur seit der Mitte des 18. Jahrhunderts* (Berlin: Weidler Buchverlag, 2019).

from that produced in Salzburg (actually, almost nearby), Vienna, or Graz, etc. The same would apply to all other regions of the former Holy Roman Empire of German Nations, which thus would quickly undermine our efforts to establish meaningful categories. Politically, of course, there is a border today, and there are also cultural differences in terms of local cuisine, music, clothing, and maybe also mentality.³ Austrian politics are different from those in Germany or Switzerland, and we can probably assume that Austrians, in general terms, espouse a unique identity, however explained. Overall, however, the entire effort to distinguish in national terms what we mean as German literature has always been problematic. As the contributors to *Negotiating Linguistic Identity* comment, this phenomenon is not unique to the German-speaking world, but rather characteristic of Europe, particularly today.⁴

What is Austrian Literature? Conceptual and Ideological Debates

This paper does not intend to raise global questions regarding national identity, language, or history, as important as they certainly are within the modern context.⁵ After all, political and emotional aspects easily influence each other and mean fairly little in the larger framework, if we might not even have to assume that the notion of an Austrian identity is nothing but the result of constructions, as in the case of French, Spanish, Italian, or British identity.⁶

3. William M. Johnston, *Der österreichische Mensch: Kulturgeschichte der Eigenart Österreichs* (Vienna: Böhlau, 2010).

4. Virve-Anneli Vihman and Kristiina Praakli (Ed.) *Negotiating Linguistic Identity: Language and Belonging in Europe* (Bern, Oxford, et al.: Peter Lang, 2014).

5. Ruth Wodak (Ed.), *Nationale und kulturelle Identitäten Österreichs: Theorien, Methoden und Probleme der Forschung zu kollektiver Identität* (Vienna: IFK, 1996); cf. also Hannes Androsch, *Auf der Suche nach Identität – Österreich: Vergangenheit, Gegenwart und Zukunft: eine Synthese der Widersprüche* (Vienna: Brandstätter, 1988); Anton Pelinka, *Zur österreichischen Identität: zwischen deutscher Vereinigung und Mitteleuropa* (Vienna: Ueberreuter, 1990); Tymofiy Havryliv, *Identitäten in der österreichischen Literatur des XX. Jahrhunderts* (Lviv, Ukraine: VNTL-KLASZYKA, 2008); Luca Lecis, *Between Empire and Republic: Austrian Identity in the Twentieth Century (1918–1995)* (Münster: Aschendorff Verlag, 2020); Ernst Bruckmüller and Peter Diem, *Das österreichische Nationalbewusstsein: Ergebnisse einer empirischen Untersuchung im Jahre 2019* (Vienna: New Academic Press, 2020).

6. See now the contributions to Ladislav Cabada, and Christopher Walsch (Ed.), *Imaginäre Räume in Zentraleuropa: kulturelle Transformationen, politische Repräsentationen und trans/nationale Identitätsentwürfe* (Herne: Gabriele Schäfer Verlag, 2019); and to Klaus Nüchtern and Thomas Walach (Eds.), *Unser Land: wie wir Heimat herstellen* (Vienna: Falter Verlag, 2020). See also Erika Thurner, *Nationale Identität und Geschlecht in Österreich nach 1945* (Innsbruck, Vienna, and Bozen: Studien Verlag, 2019); Ernst Hanisch, *Landschaft und Identität: Versuch einer österreichischen Erfahrungsgeschichte* (Vienna, Cologne, and Weimar: Böhlau Verlag, 2019); Rudolf de Cillia, Ruth Wodak, Markus Rheindorf, and Sabine

Instead, I want to draw our attention to a remarkable late medieval manuscript that will allow us to problematize the entire issue of 'Austrian' from a historical perspective. The *Ambraser Heldenbuch* was one of the last medieval manuscripts preserving a large number of major German verse narratives (romances and heroic epics) before the interest in and memory of medieval literature disappeared or became lost respectively for almost two hundred years. Studying the *Ambraser Heldenbuch* from our vantage point today, however, might give us an intriguing insight into the entire notion of 'Austrian' in literary-historical terms, as problematic as it might be, when we consider the content of this miscellany manuscript more in detail.

Considering the extent to which research has struggled with the question what constitutes 'Austrian,' it is worth to approach it also from a non-modern perspective to discriminate it better than has been possible in the past. Herbert Arlt informs us, for instance,

Die Auseinandersetzungen um den Begriff 'österreichische Literatur' widerspiegeln die sich wandelnden Bedingungen und den Stand der Forschungsmethodologien – von Chronologien über nationale Entwürfe hin zu Darstellungen von Literatur und literarischen Prozessen.⁷

[The struggles with the term "Austrian literature" mirrors the changing conditions and the status of research methodologies – from chronologies to national concepts to the presentation of literature and literary processes).

Josef Nadler, in his grandiose but rather conservative approach, had formulated, reflecting a much older concept,

So liegt das Schwergewicht des Staates, der Österreich geworden ist, in den Alpen. Aber Wien an der Donau war der Schwerpunkt des großen Gefüges, in das dieses Alpenland mit den Ländern der Sudeten und Karpaten geschichtlich zusammengewachsen war. Dieser staatliche Großraum, im Werden, in der Vollendung, in seinem Abbruch hat das geistige Gesicht der Völker modelliert, die ihn bewohnten und mit ihnen auch als geistige Gesicht Österreichs.⁸

[Hence, the focus of the nation which turned into Austria, rests in the Alps. But Vienna on the Danube was the focus of the large political composition which had grown historically into this alpine country with the Sudetenland and Carpathian

Lehner, *Österreichische Identitäten im Wandel: Empirische Untersuchungen zu ihrer diskursiven Konstruktion 1995–2015*. (Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2020); Lecis, *Between Empire and Republic: Austrian Identity in the Twentieth Century (1918–1995)*, 2020. The literature on this topic is legion, of course, which indicates the urgent matter which requires intensive investigation today, maybe more than ever before.

7. Herbert Alt, *Österreichische Literatur: "Strukturen", Transformationen, Widerspruchsfelder* (Ingbert: Röhrig Universitätsverlag, 2000), 9.

8. Josef Nadler, *Literaturgeschichte Österreichs* (Salzburg: Otto Müller, 1951), 9.

lands. This large political unit, in its growth, in its completion, in its collapse, has modeled the intellectual face of the people who inhabit it, and hence also the intellectual face of Austria).

Herbert Zeman insists on the dynastic history of the Habsburg family which shaped in a unique fashion the Austrian identity. Alois Wolf discriminates further: "Sehr Unterschiedliches hat im Laufe der Zeit mitgewirkt, um ihn [the term 'Austrian'] zu füllen: die Gegenreformation, das Barock, der Josephinismus, der Vielvölkerstaat der Habsburger mit Wien als Kaiserresidenz . . ." (Many very different aspects have contributed in the course of time to fill [the term 'Austria'] with substance: the Counter-Reformation, the Baroque, the Josephinism, the multinational state of the Habsburgs with Vienna as the imperial residence . . .).⁹ Undoubtedly, whatever we might perceive of as 'Austrian,' it is the result of at least a thousand years of cultural history, as Franz Römer has emphasized.¹⁰

Fritz Peter Knapp had already warned us about a too narrow nationalistic definition of 'Austrian,' offering this perspective:

Die Abfassung einer *Geschichte der Literatur in Österreich* darf nicht mehr als vaterländische Notwendigkeit im Sinn des in der habsburgischen Donaumonarchie begonnenen und in der ersten Republik abgeschlossenen "Nagl-Zeidler-Castle" bestimmt werden; wohl aber führt sie den modernen Leser durch die Charakteristik der Literaturtradition hin zu einer neuen Identifikation mit der österreichischen Kultur.¹¹

[Writing a History of Literature in Austria can no longer be conceived of as a patriotic necessity in the sense of the "Nagl-Zeidler-Castle" which began in the Habsburg Danube monarchy and was then completed in the First Republic. However, by contrast, it takes the modern reader through the characteristics of the literary tradition toward a new identification with Austrian culture.]

Herbert Zeman deserves particular credit for his many efforts in that regard, trying hard to stay clear of a nationalist, patriotic approach and yet to offer an inclusive, pragmatic concept, by way of observing geographic criteria combined with dynastic principles:

9. Alois Wolf, "Das literarische Leben Österreichs im Hochmittelalter," in *Literaturgeschichte Österreichs von den Anfängen im Mittelalter bis zur Gegenwart* (ed.) Herbert Zeman, 1-82. Graz: Akademische Druck- und Verlagsanstalt, 1996), 4.

10. Franz Römer, *1000 Jahre Österreich – Wege zu einer österreichischen Identität : Vorträge anlässlich des Dies academicus der Geisteswissenschaftlichen Fakultät der Universität Wien am 10. Jänner 1996* (Wiener Universitätsreden N.F., 6. Vienna: WUV-Wiener Universitäts-Verlag, 1997).

11. Fritz Peter Knapp, *Die Literatur des Früh- und Hochmittelalters in den Bistümern Passau, Salzburg, Brixen und Trient von den Anfängen bis zum Jahre 1273* (Graz: Akademische Druck- und Verlagsanstalt, 1994), 6.

Aufgenommen wurden jene Autoren, deren Geburtsort jenen Territorien zugehörte, die im oben beschriebenen Sinn zum historischen Österreich zuzurechnen sind, ferner jene deutsch- und fremdsprachigen Autoren, die vorübergehend oder ab einem gewissen Alter ständig in Österreich lebten und das literarische Österreich beeinflussten.¹²

[Those authors were included whose birthplace belonged to those territories that can be counted as having been part of the historical Austria as described above; then also those German- and non-German language authors who lived temporarily or from a certain age permanently in Austria and influenced the literary Austria].

Joseph P. Strelka points out that in contrast to the Holy Roman Empire, at least in its western dimension, Austria had always a stable capital, a firm center in Vienna, whereas in Germany there was no such firm pivotal point from which a homogenous literary development could emerge.¹³ We could cite many other voices who addressed the same issue, but we would not make much progress. The issue itself is highly amorphous and almost subjective, especially since the eighteenth century when nationalism emerged in strong terms and created artificial cultural and linguistic boundaries which had never existed before.¹⁴

Anyone prior to 1800 would have viewed the situation of Austria in very different terms, although the dynastic conditions had already developed in distinct outlines favoring a separate Austrian identity since the fifteenth century. The major literary history edited by Willi Erzgräber focused on the late Middle Ages illustrates the phenomenon quite impressively, though he might not have intended to reflect on national aspects. There are unique chapters dedicated to Italian, English, French, Czech, Norse, and Dutch literature, but whenever a contributor examines a genre, such as lyric poetry (Alfred Karnein), the only category used to define this along 'national' lines is 'German.'¹⁵

However, the famous *Ambraser Heldenbuch*, compiled between 1504 and 1516 by the Bozen (today: Bressanone) toll keeper Hans Ried, suddenly has to serve, at least for some scholars, as a major literary representative of 'Austrian' literature.¹⁶ Fritz Peter Knapp has no hesitation to claim this major manuscript and all the

12. Herbert Zeman (Ed.), *Bio-bibliografisches Lexikon der Literatur Österreichs* (Freiburg i. Br., Berlin, and Vienna: Rombach, 2016), XI.

13. Joseph P. Strelka, *Mitte, Maß und Mitgefühl: Werke und Autoren der österreichischen Literaturlandschaft* (Vienna, Cologne, and Weimar: Böhlau, 1997), 17.

14. See now the contributions to Wolfgang Brylla, and Cezary Lipiński (Ed.), *Thalloris: Philologische Studien 3* (2018), with the thematic focus on *Nationalismen*; cf. als *Im Clash der Identitäten: Nationalismen im literatur- und kulturgeschichtlichen Diskurs* (Göttingen: V&R unipress, 2020).

15. Willi Erzgräber (Ed.), *Europäisches Spätmittelalter* (Wiesbaden: Akademische Verlagsgesellschaft Athenaion, 1978).

16. For a digitized version of the *Ambraser Heldenbuch*, see: https://digital.onb.ac.at/RepViewer/viewer.faces?doc=DTL_3332756&order=1&view=SINGLE.

works contained in it for Austria, so to speak, although he then comments in much more global terms,

Das A.H. ist v. einzigartiger Bedeutung für d. Überlieferung d. dt. Lit. d. MA, da 15 d. genannten Titel (alle, d. hier mit keiner Hs.-Sigle versehen sind) nur in dieser Hs..erhalten sind. . . . Zudem gibt uns d. Codex einen ziemlich einmaligen Einblick in d. spezielle öst. Lit.situation, was d. Rezeption auswärtiger nicht-lyr. Texte wie d. entsprechende (erweisbare o. vermutete) autochthone Produktion betrifft.¹⁷

[The Ambraser Heldenbuch is of singular importance for the tradition of German medieval literature since 15 of the mentioned titles (all those that have no manuscript call number) have survived only in this manuscript. Moreover, the codex provides us with a pretty unique insight into the special Austrian literary situation as far as the the reception of foreign, non-lyrical texts and the corresponding (demonstrated or suspected) autochthonous production is concerned.]

He continues: “In d. Ausw. spiegelt sich aber nicht nur d. hierzulande damals verfügbare Tradition weit älterer Texte, sondern auch Maximilians auf Legitimation eigener Herrschaft gerichtete Beschwörung d. ‘alten Ritterherrlichkeit’” (ibid, 138; The selection does not only mirror the then available tradition of much older texts, but also Maximilian’s insistence on the legitimacy of his own rule by means of the ‘old glory of chivalry’).

Similarly, in Zeman’s *Bio-Bibliografisches Lexikon* (see note 12) we find entries on *Alpharts Tod*, the *Ambraser Liederbuch* [not to be confused with the *Ambraser Heldenbuch!*], the *Buch von Bern* (*Dietrichs Flucht*, *Rabenschlacht*), etc., that is, on those literary texts that we presume had been produced within the geographical and political framework of what we would call Austria today, or the Habsburg Empire prior to World War I. This then invites us to use this major manuscript as a segue to explore more in detail how the term ‘Austrian’ might even be appropriate, or whether we should not rather reserve it for the modern period when a fully-fledged national concept had emerged, maybe an artificial construct, but still a firm construct after all. Many facets of the concept of the ‘nation’ have been discussed only very recently, and Daniel Fuld can be quoted here as one of the important voices alerting us to the highly political notion of the ‘nation’:

Fragt man, ob und mit welchem Recht sich die Germanistik als ‘Nationalphilologie’ begreifen kann, so bietet die gängige Neigung zur Identifizierung von Nation und Staat allerdings gerade kein tragfähiges Fundament. Denn die Germanistik ist ja nicht die Wissenschaft von Sprache und Literatur Deutschlands oder Österreichs. Ihre Gegenstandsbereiche sind die deutsche Sprache und die deutschsprachige Literatur

17. Knapp, “Ambraser Heldenbuch,” in *Bio-bibliografisches Lexikon der Literatur Österreichs* (ed.) Herbert Zeman, 137-39 (see note 12); here 138.

und damit, gemessen an politischen Entitäten, von transnationaler Dimension.¹⁸

[When you question with what justification German Studies can conceive of itself as a national philology, then the usual tendency to identify the nation with the state does not offer a solid foundation. After all, German Studies is not the scholarly investigation of the language and literature in Germany or Austria. Its subject matter are the German language and the German-language literature, which are, compared with the political entities, of a transnational dimension.]

The *Ambraser Heldenbuch* particularly allows us to probe this issue more in-depth because of its highly representative function. It stands out for many different reasons. It was one of the last major collections of medieval heroic and courtly narratives; it constituted a massive literary enterprise funded by Emperor Maximilian I; it preserved a number of significant texts from the history of medieval German literature which are not extant in any other manuscripts (*Kudrun*, *Mauritius von Craûn*, etc., ca. one-third of all texts contained here); it was handwritten at a time when the printing press had already established full maturity; it used parchment and not paper, although the opposite had already become the norm at that time for all book publishing; it developed into a calligraphic masterpiece and was, together with its illustrations, a most representative manuscript contributing to the emperor's overall strategy to present himself as 'the last knight' and as a glorious representative of courtliness and chivalry.¹⁹

18. Daniel Fulda, "Hat Nationalphilologie eine Zukunft? Einige begriffliche, institutionelle und politische Überlegungen," in *Deutsche Philologie? Nationalphilologien heute* (ed.) Hans-Joachim Solms and Jörn Weinert, 71-92 (Berlin: Erich Schmidt Verlag, 2020), 83. In essence, he is pleading for a national philology which is not essentialist and not extremely cosmopolitan (91). For more on that, see Andreas Rockwitz, "Kulturkonflikte als Kampf um die Kultur: Hyperkultur und Kulturessentialismus," in *Das Ende der Illusionen: Politik, Ökonomie und Kultur in der Spätmoderne*. Diagramme, 29-61 (Berlin: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2019). I have argued, by contrast, that the notion of the national philology constitutes an outdated concept and was never really valid or embraced in the pre-modern world/literature, Albrecht Classen, "Die Antwort auf die Frage nach der Zukunft liegt auch in der Vergangenheit: Neue Ansätze zu einer europäisch konzipierten Mediävistik. Oder: Wohin mit der national-geprägten Philologie in Anbetracht von St. Augustin, Martianus Capella, Boethius, Thomas von Aquin oder Christine de Pizan?" *Zeitschrift für deutsche Philologie*. Sonderheft: *Deutsche Philologie: Nationalphilologien heute*, 139 (2021): 34-70; cf. also the other contributions to this volume.

19. Jan-Dirk Müller, *Gedechtnus: Literatur und Hofgesellschaft um Maximilian I* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 1982); cf. also Hermann Wiesflecker, *Kaiser Maximilian I.: Das Reich, Österreich und Europa an der Wende zur Neuzeit*. Vol. 5: *Der Kaiser und seine Umwelt: Hof, Staat, Wirtschaft, Gesellschaft und Kultur* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1986).

The Manuscript and its Historical Significance

The manuscript is called *Ambraser Heldenbuch* because it was, mentioned for the first time in 1596 as part of Archduke Ferdinand of Tyrol's collection, housed for several hundred years in the Chamber of Art and Curiosities (*Kuriositätenkabinett*) at Castle Ambras outside of Innsbruck until it was relocated to Vienna in 1806 to the Obere Belvedere, 1891 to the Kunsthistorisches Museum to secure it from the approaching Napoleonic troops, as ordered by Emperor Franz I. Later it was transferred to the Vienna Hof-Bibliothek ("Court Library"), which in 1920 became the Österreichische Nationalbibliothek ("Austrian National Library").²⁰

The compound or epithet *Heldenbuch* is due to the presence of a fairly large number of heroic epics, but this is still a misnomer because a good handful of other genres are also included here which certainly balance out the heroic element and inject a strong sense of courtliness as an ideal despite numerous problems raised by the various poets. Following Jan-Dirk Müller, we can probably agree that Emperor Maximilian only intended to put together a collection of major or minor literary works from the Middle Ages, as they just had been available, without any particular system in mind: "Eine gattungsgeschichtlich engere und präzisere Bedeutung von 'Heldenbuch' lag nicht in seinem Interesse" (To define the term 'Heldenbuch' more precisely and more narrowly as to its genre was not in his interest).²¹ Though compiled between 1504 and 1516, the volume contains mostly heroic and courtly verse epics from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. However, Hans Ried did not shy away at all from adapting the medieval language into his own early modern Bavarian dialect. Mario Klauer observed the intriguing correlation between the manuscript itself and its scribe because the *Ambraser Heldenbuch* stands exactly at the dividing line between the Middle Ages and the early modern world. In other words, Ried served at a physical border, and the manuscript marked a cultural-historical border, and he himself was not a native to Tyrol, originating from Bavaria.²² For his patron, however, Emperor Maximilian, this valuable manuscript contributed to his global endeavors to glorify himself through his own 'novels' or 'romances' (mostly autobiographical), architecture, sculptures, and images.

20. Martin Wierschin, "Das Ambraser Heldenbuch Maximilians I." Part 1: "Der biographische Aspekt," *Der Schlern* 50 (1976): 429-441; Wierschin, "Das Ambraser Heldenbuch Maximilians I." Part 2: "Das Runkelstein-Projekt – Idee und Objektivation," *Der Schlern* 50 (1976): 493-507; Wierschin, "Das Ambraser Heldenbuch Maximilians I." Part 3: "Probleme, Konstellationen und Details der Ausführung: der typologische Aspekt," *Der Schlern* 50 (1976): 557-570.

21. Müller, "Alte Heldenbücher im Kreis Maximilians: Zu einer umstrittenen Bezeichnung," in *Kaiser Maximilian I. und das Ambraser Heldenbuch* (ed.) Mario Klarer, 51-59 (Vienna, Cologne, and Weimar: Böhlau, 2019), 59.

22. Mario Klarer, "Einleitung: Das Ambraser Heldenbuch," in *Kaiser Maximilian I. und das Ambraser Heldenbuch* (ed.) Mario Klarer, 11-24 (Vienna: Böhlau, 2019), 15-16.

The manuscript is decorated, on its cover, with an image of two heavily armed knights, but otherwise, throughout the entire volume, there are mostly small depictions of butterflies, crickets, flowers, small figures, some women and men, and even little angels playing on a musical instrument. There is virtually no thematic connection between these illuminations and the content of the various texts. Although the *Ambraser Heldenbuch* represents truly a monumental effort, a very expensive enterprise, much about its specific origin, the sources, and the purpose ultimately remains unknown to us.²³

The Content of this Miscellany Manuscript

The best approach to this significant literary document from the early modern age would certainly be the close examination of the content itself, which then will allow us to grasp more in detail why or why not the qualifier of ‘Austrian’ might be valid here or not. Let us hence reflect on the arrangement and generic characteristics of the individual contributions.

The narratives falling into the category of courtly literature are as follows:

Der Stricker, *Frauenehre* (manuscript d)
Mauritius von Craûn (sole surviving manuscript)
 Hartmann von Aue, *Iwein* (manuscript d)
 Hartmann von Aue, *Das Büchlein / Die Klage* (sole surviving manuscript), and *Das zweite Büchlein* (sole surviving manuscript)
 [anonymous] (*Der Mantel*)
Erec (the only more or less complete manuscript; the introduction is missing).

Narratives that belong to the heroic genres are:

Dietrichs Flucht (manuscript d)
Rabenschlacht (manuscript d)
Nibelungenlied (manuscript d)
Diu Klage (incomplete, manuscript d) – a continuation of the *Nibelungenlied*
Kudrun (sole surviving manuscript)
Biterolf und Dietleib (sole surviving manuscript)
Ortnit (manuscript A)
Wolfdietrich A (sole surviving manuscript)

The third group consists of shorter verse narratives, such as *mæren*, or texts of a different type of genre:

23. Hubert Aliade, “Zur Entstehungsgeschichte des *Ambraser Heldenbuchs*,” in *Kaiser Maximilian I*, 27-35; Aaron Tratter, “Buchschnuck, Lagen, eere Seiten,” *Kaiser Maximilian I*. (see note 21), 37-48.

Die böse Frau (sole surviving manuscript)
 Herrand von Wildonie, “Die getreue Ehefrau” (sole surviving manuscript); “Der betrogene Gatte,” “Der nackte Kaiser” (sole surviving manuscript); and “Die Katze” (sole surviving manuscript)
 Ulrich von Liechtenstein, *Frauenbuch* (sole surviving manuscript)
 Wernher der Gartenaere, *Meier Helmbrecht* (manuscript A)
 Der Stricker, *Pfaffe Amis* (manuscript W)

Finally, there are two fragmentary texts, both of a very different character:

Wolfram von Eschenbach, *Titarel* (fragment, manuscript H)
 Der Priester Johann (fragment, sole surviving manuscript).

Undoubtedly, some of the heroic epics take place in the Alps, though not one of the texts collected here can be specifically identified with that region intratextually. The most famous poem, the *Nibelungenlied*, was certainly written down in Passau upon behalf of Bishop Wolfger von Erlau. The events discussed take place first in Worms on the Rhine (the protagonist Siegfried arrives from the Netherlands), then in Iceland, and finally in Hungary, while the Burgundians, upon their sister Kriemhild’s invitation, travel from Worms down to Bavaria, along the Danube into the Wachau region, then Vienna, and from there to the Hunnish kingdom. There is, in short, virtually nothing that could be claimed to be authentically Austrian in that context. The same certainly applies to *Diu Klage*, in which the few survivors do nothing but talk about the horrendous events and lament the tragic outcome. The horrific news is then transported all the way back to Vienna, and then Worms, which closes the narrative cycle.

Thirteenth-century *Kudrun* takes place somewhere near the north-eastern coast of the Holy Roman Empire, whether on the shores of the North Sea or the shores of the Baltic Sea.²⁴ Both *Ortnit* and *Wolfdietrich A* are generally located in the Alpine region, but the poets demonstrated certainly no particular interest in the political or geographic region. *Dietrichs Flucht* is contained both in the *Ambraser Heldenbuch* as well as in four other manuscripts (Berlin, Staatsbibliothek, Mgf 1062; Vienna, Nationalbibliothek, Cod 2779; Heidelberg, Universitätsbibliothek, cpg 314; and Innsbruck, Universitätsbibliothek, B III). This clearly indicates that the *Ambraser Heldenbuch* was simply one of a number of other manuscript depositories of this famous epic poem.²⁵

Any effort to associate the other texts contained in the *Ambraser Heldenbuch* somehow with the Habsburg dynasty or the Alpine region is bound to fail. The

24. Classen, “Why not *Kudrun*?: A Middle High German Epic Poem as Exciting Literary Entertainment and Relevant Study Object for Post-Modern Readers,” *Once and Future Classroom* XVII.1 (2021): 1-21.

25. Elisabeth Lienert, and Gertud Beck (Ed.), *Dietrichs Flucht: Textgeschichtliche Ausgabe* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 2003), IX-XXI.

anonymous verse narrative *Mauritius von Craûn*, for instance, perhaps created around 1220/1240, certainly takes place in northwestern France and constitutes a provocative challenge to the traditional norms of courtly culture. It would be virtually impossible to associate this *mære* in any meaningful way with Austria, however we might want to define it, especially because the poet refers to the evil Roman Emperor Nero as a negative foil, and because the protagonist himself, Mauritius, proves to be a rather disappointing character who enforces a sexual reward from his lady after she had broken their 'contract' concerning their love relationship.²⁶

We can clearly recognize Hans Ried's dialect language (Bavarian), apart from the fact that the plot is specifically associated with the world of French aristocracy. Nothing suggests either formally or content-wise any association of this text with the Austrian audience, that is the Habsburg court or the Austrian nobility. The anonymous poet had certainly a broader audience in mind, but this highly problematic verse narrative obviously appealed to Emperor Maximilian, maybe because it was predicated on the question of how true knighthood could be maintained under most difficult circumstances. Moreover, the early reference to Troy as the origin of knighthood was certainly of great interest to late medieval readers/listeners, though it remains unclear whether Maximilian had a full understanding of the implied criticism of knighthood itself and its negative fallout.²⁷

The fragment of Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Titurel* (ca. 1220), a Franconian from north of Ansbach, presents one of the most enigmatic pieces in courtly medieval literature, with the two protagonists, Sigune and Schionatulander, challenged by a mysterious message embossed by means of gemstones on a dog leash which talks about love as intimately bound with death.²⁸ When the dog

26. Heimo Reinitzer (Ed.), *Mauritius von Craûn* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 2000); the text has been translated into modern German several times, see, for instance, *Moriz von Craûn. Mittelhochdeutsch/Neuhochdeutsch* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1992); reissued with some corrections and an English introduction (Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press, 2000); published online at <http://www.gened.arizona.edu/aclassen/morizcomplete.pdf>. (2004).

27. Hubertus Fischer, *Ritter, Schiff und Dame: Mauritius von Craûn: Text und Kontext* (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag, 2000); Classen, "Mauritius von Craûn and Otto von Freising's *The Two Cities*: 12th- and 13th-Century Scepticism about Historical Progress and the Metaphor of the Ship," *German Quarterly* 79, no. 1 (2006): 28-49; Classen, "Courtliness and Transgression at Arthur's Court: With Emphasis on the Middle High German Poet Neidhart and the Anonymous Verse Novella *Mauritius von Craûn*," *Arthuriana* 20, no. 4 (2010): 3-19; Classen, "Disrupted Festivities in Medieval Courtly Literature: Poetic Reflections on the Social and Ethical Decline in *Mauritius von Craûn*, The Stricker's *Daniel von dem Blühenden Tal*, and Heinrich Wittenwiler's *Der Ring*," *Neophilologus* 100, no. 1 (2016): 87-104.

28. Wolfram von Eschenbach, *Titurel* (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2003). There are three manuscripts, and the version in the *Ambraser Heldenbuch* (H) is only a copy, so it seems, of the best manuscript in the Bayerische Staatsbibliothek Munich, cgm 19.

escapes because Sigune had loosened the knot in the leash, she forces her lover to recapture the dog, which will result, however, as we know from Wolfram's *Parzival*, in Schionatulander's death. The text on the leash proves to be a fragment, and Wolfram's own text has survived only as a fragment, perhaps intentionally so.²⁹ The events take place in an imaginary world of the courts (first part) and in a forest (second part), and there are no elements that suggest a connection to the Austrian Alps.

All the other texts not addressed yet also do not lend any particular weight to the spurious hypothesis that the *Ambraser Heldenbuch* might have served as an early representative of typically 'Austrian' medieval literature. We might even go so far as to question the concept as such because Austria was not even a separate political entity at that time with a sense of cultural identity clearly apart from 'Germany' (or rather: the Holy Roman Empire), whatever that might have meant in the Middle Ages. Late medieval poets such as Hugo von Trimberg were fully aware of the many different dialects, but they did not distinguish, therefore, as historical linguists have confirmed already for a long time, Austrian literature from German literature.³⁰ In his *Renner* (ca. 1300), the poet informs his audience about the strong role of dialect variants:

Swâben ir wörter spaltent,
 Die Franken ein teil si valtent,
 Die Beier si zezerrrent,
 Die Düringe si ûf sperrent,
 Die Sahren si bezückerent,
 Die Rînliute si verdrückerent....³¹
 [The Swabians split their words,
 the Franconians fold them to some extent,
 the Bavarians pull them apart,
 the Thuringians open them up,
 the Saxons pronounce them quickly,

29. Classen, *Utopie und Logos. Vier Studien zu Wolframs von Eschenbach Titirel* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter Universitätsverlag, 1990); Alexander Sager, *Minne von maeren: On Wolfram's "Titirel"* (Göttingen: V und R unipress, 2006); As to the fragmentary nature, see, Classen "Der Text der nie enden will. Poetologische Überlegungen zu fragmentarischen Strukturen in mittelalterlichen und modernen Texten," *Zeitschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Linguistik*, vol. 99: *Anfang und Ende*, ed. Wolfgang Haubrichs (1995): 83-113.

30. See, for instance, Friedrich Kauffmann, *Geschichte der schwäbischen Mundart im Mittelalter und in der Neuzeit: Mit Textproben und einer Geschichte der Schriftsprache in Schwaben* (Berlin and Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2020); Hermann Niebaum, and Jürgen Macha, *Einführung in die Dialektologie des Deutschen* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 2006).

31. Hugo von Trimberg, *Der Renner* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1970), 220. cf. also Rudolf Kilian Weigand, *Der 'Renner' des Hugo von Trimberg: Überlieferung, Quellenabhängigkeit und Struktur einer spätmittelalterlichen Lehrdichtung* (Wiesbaden: Dr. Ludwig Reichert Verlag, 2000).

the Rhinelanders press them together. . . .]

In that context, Hugo also turns to the Austrians, the Styrians, the Carinthians, and then to the Bohemians, Hungarians, and Italians, not to speak of the French, English, Norwegians, and Irish, etc., but he dismisses all of those dialects and foreign languages and emphasizes that

Die lantsprâche dâ vor genant
 In tiutschen landen sint bekant:
 Swer ûz den iht guotes nimt,
 Daz wol in sînem getihte zimt,
 Mich dünket dern habe niht missetân,
 Tuot erz mit künste und niht nâch wân. (22286–91)

[These regional languages mentioned above
 are known in the German lands:
 he who takes something out of them of value
 which seems to fit well into his poem,
 does not do badly, so I think,
 especially when he does it artfully and not without a plan.]

Hugo does not voice opposition to a flexible language use, as long as it is predicated on a solid and poetically productive employment of the standard language, (Middle High) German. At the same time, he admits that all people tend to lean toward their own dialect as they were born into it (22307). Taking these linguistic statements as evidence, we face a clear documentation that the various regions of modern-day Austria were simply acknowledged as determined by dialects. As much as Hugo himself favored Franconian, his own dialect (22308–21),³² he did not grant the existence of dialects as a political framework; so, for him there was no ‘Austria’ as such, especially because “Oesterrîche” (22274; Austria) was not the same as “Stîrlant” (22275; Styria) or “Kernde” (22276; Carinthia).

Within the context of the *Ambraser Heldenbuch*, however, there is one significant exception, Ulrich von Liechtenstein’s *Frauenbuch*, from ca. 1257, the only copy of which being extant in this manuscript.³³ Ulrich was squarely

32. David Petry, “‘Frankenland hat Ehren viel!’: über Heimatgefühl und Frankenlob im ‘Renner’ Hugos von Trimberg,” in *Franken und Forchheim im Mittelalter* (eds.) Andreas Otto Weber and Wolfgang Wüst (Forchheim: Streit, 2004), 53-62.

33. Ulrich von Liechtenstein, *Das Frauenbuch: Mittelhochdeutsch/Neuhochdeutsch* (Stuttgart: Philipp Reclam jun. 2003); cf. Wernfried Hofmeister, “Das ‘Frauenbuch’ Ulrichs von Liechtenstein als eine interdisziplinäre Herausforderung. Ansätze und Forschungsperspektiven,” in *Ich – Ulrich von Liechtenstein: Literatur und Politik im Mittelalter: Akten der Akademie Friesach “Stadt und Kultur im Mittelalter” Friesach (Kärnten), 2.–6. September 1996* (eds.) Franz Viktor Spechtler and Barbara Maier, 205-220 (Klagenfurt: Wieser Verlag, 1999). See also the other

situated in the world of Styria, as he also expressed clearly in his *Frauendienst* (ca. 1255), where he combines his literary imagination with his autobiographical concerns. The *Frauenbuch*, a kind of “Minnerede” in which a man and a woman debate the current cultural conditions concerning ethics, the pursuit of love and honor, and the lack thereof.³⁴ Both speakers are very vocal as to the steady and almost catastrophic decline of all traditional values, but they debate who the culprit might have been. There are even complaints by the woman that men have turned to homosexual practices, which she regards as abhorrent and a clear sign for the loss of all courtly ideals and hence the downfall of the customs of courtly love (637–66).

Ulrich’s *Frauenbuch* is placed as the twenty-first work in the *Ambraser Heldenbuch*, so it might not have enjoyed prime importance. Nevertheless, we regard it today as one of Ulrich’s most relevant verse narratives which allows us to probe more deeply the discourse on sexuality and love in the late Middle Ages. But the poet does not include any references to the historical or political background for his verse narrative and sets in with his poetic account without any particular explanations, except that a lady and a knight are seated next to each other and embark on this conversation. Their language is determined by the standards of courtly Middle High German, free from local, dialect elements. There are good reasons to assume that the *Frauenbuch* made it into the *Ambraser Heldenbuch* because of personal connections between the poet, a high-ranking Styrian nobleman, and the influential courtier Paul von Liechtenstein (not a blood relative!) in charge of the compilation project on behalf of Maximilian I. Christopher Young points out that Paul originated from a Tyrolean family, but the identity of the patronyms obviously encourage him to include Ulrich’s work from ca. 250 years earlier, next to the short verse narratives by the latter’s son-in-law, Herrand von Wildonie (d. ca. 1278): “Die treue Gattin” (no. 17), “Der betrogene Gatte” (no. 18), “Der nackte Kaiser” (no. 19), and “Die Katze” (no. 20).³⁵

Despite many efforts by various scholars to identify a very specific programmatic structure of the *Ambraser Heldenbuch*, the criteria we could use are

contributions to this volume. See also the studies in Sandra Linden, and Christopher Young (Ed.), *Ulrich von Liechtenstein: Leben – Zeit – Werk – Forschung* (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2010).

34. Jacob Klingner, and Ludger Lieb (Ed.), *Handbuch Minnereden* (Berlin and Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2017), vol. 1, 646–650, B402a.

35. Young, ed. and trans. (see note 33), 37–39. See also Volker Zapf, “Herrand von Wildonie,” in *Deutsches Literatur-Lexikon: Das Mittelalter*, vol. 5: *Epik (Vers – Strophe – Prosa) und Kleinformen* (ed.) Wolfgang Achnitz, 679–684 (Berlin and Boston: Walter de Gruyter 2013); for the critical edition, see Hanns Fischer (Ed.), *Herrand von Wildonie* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1969). For an English translation of his texts, see J. W. Thomas, *The Tales and Songs of Herrand von Wildonie*. Translated into English Verse with an Introduction. Studies in the Germanic Languages and Literatures, 4 (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 1972).

only rather vague and superficial, and do not necessarily address any kind of national, not even dynastic concerns, despite the significant role of the heroic epics. As Heimo Reinitzer underscores,

Die wenig differenzierende Einteilung vermischt formale und inhaltliche Kriterien, konstruiert ganz verschieden umfangreiche Teile und muß mit einem Appendix operieren, der in sich uneinheitlich, vom Umfang her unbedeutend und den anderen Teilen unvergleichbar ist.³⁶

[The little differentiating division mixes formal and content criteria, creates parts of very diverse volume and has to operate with an appendix which is inconsistent, irrelevant regarding the volume, and not comparable to the other parts.]

The primary concern in the compilation appears to be, following Reinitzer, the emperor's personal tastes and interests. However, the collection proves to be highly uneven, and the entire work appears to be more like a miscellany manuscript without a specific order, apart from major thematic groups within. It would be impossible, hence, to determine any particular Austrian affiliations or preferences.

To repeat our previous observation and to underscore their relevance for the overall assessment, the inclusion of Herrand von Wildonie's verse narratives and Ulrich von Liechtenstein's *minnerede*, his *Frauenbuch*, indicates only the collector's intrigue with courtly literature and its attempts to establish social, ethical, moral, and literary standards. Those were exactly the same values and ideals as at virtually all other aristocratic courts in the late Middle Ages. Reinitzer rightly emphasizes that the theme of courtly love appears to matter most, whether in positive or in negative terms, whether we think of the *Nibelungenlied* – here titled “Das Puech von Chrimhildin von Burgunden” – Hartmann von Aue's *Iwein*, or Ulrich von Liechtenstein's *Frauenbuch*.³⁷ For Reinitzer, hence, the *Ambraser Heldenbuch* needs to be viewed through the lens of the gender discourse as a fundamental value for the life at court: “Das ‘Ambraser Heldenbuch’ ist ein Buch, in dem unterschiedliche Heldengeschichte und Heldentum als abhängig von und verbunden mit weiblicher Tugend (und Untugend) gesehen wird” (The *Ambraser Heldenbuch* is a book in which diverse histories of heroes and of heroism are conceived of as dependent on and connected with feminine virtues (and lack thereof)).³⁸

We have thus moved far away from various attempts to identify this massive and precious manuscript as a mirror of Austrian literature. This cannot mean, however, as Fritz Peter Knapp has repeatedly insisted, that we are here on the trail of a “soziopolitische[n] Sonderweg des deutschsprachigen Südostens im 13.

36. Reinitzer, *Mauritius von Craîn*, 2000, IX.

37. Ibid, see note 36, X-XI.

38. Ibid, see note 36, XII.

Jahrhundert" (socio-politically unique trail of the German-language southeast in the 13th century), implying the unique situation of Austrian literature after all.³⁹ It seems highly questionable to jump from the reference to local traditions in some of the narratives contained in this manuscript to the assumption that hence there was a local, political interest in these poems as representatives of that region. Austrian scholars like to think that this was a high likelihood, but the evidence does not lend itself for this argument.

Conclusion

Scholarship has consistently identified the *Ambraser Heldenbuch* as a most significant treasure trove of medieval German literature. It was commissioned by Emperor Maximilian I, who was probably closely involved in its creation, but despite all efforts by Austrian nationalists to claim this major work as evidence of a specifically medieval Austrian identity and political entity, neither the circumstances nor the content, the language, the selection of texts, nor the choice of genres justifies this approach. This manuscript preserved many major texts from Middle High German literature, but 'German' here simply means a standard language commonly used at the various courts, and we cannot draw from this *Heldenbuch* as a source of incipient cultural identity as 'Austrian.'

As Hans-Joachim Solms and Jörn Weinert now emphasize, philology as an academic subject matter fundamentally aims at the "'Verstehen' einer umfassend bestimmten Kultur, wobei der Schwerpunkt in der Analyse von Texten als den Objektivationen von Sprache und Literatur besteht" ('comprehension' of a globally conceived culture, the focus of which consists of the analysis of texts as the reification of language and literature).⁴⁰ They include also philosophy, law, religion, and art as associated with literature and postulate that all of these constitute a collective of an academic discipline concerned with culture and identity, that is, with the life of people. Their key concept aims at the "gewachsene[] Charakteristika einzelner Kulturkreise" (6; historically grown characteristics of individual circles of culture), which would substitute for the highly ideologized term "Volk" (people). This appears as a useful and pragmatic strategy also vis-à-vis the *Ambraser Heldenbuch*, which should not be 'colonized' for a postmodern notion of Austria as a political entity, especially because such a "Kulturkreis" would be

39. Knapp, "Österreichische Literatur um 1250 und Ulrichs Rezeption der Blütezeit," in *Ulrich von Liechtenstein* (eds.) Linden and Young (see note 33), 99-131; here 100. Later, Knapp formulates his observation that the majority of texts included in the *Ambraser Heldenbuch* were "heimische[] Produkte[]" (131; homemade products), a claim, however, which cannot really be confirmed when we study the wide range of individual poems.

40. Hans-Joachim Solms, and Jörn Weinert, "Einleitung," in *Deutsche Philologie? Nationalphilologien heute*, 1-8, 5.

embedded in a “Netz aller ‘Kulturkreise’” (6; network of all cultural circles). It is understandable that the modern generation of Austrian literary scholars argues strongly in favor of a unique modern Austrian literature,⁴¹ but this should not blind us to the specific historical conditions which facilitated its growth over the centuries.

The *Ambraser Heldenbuch* was certainly a major literary and artistic accomplishment by Hans Ried and his supporters/commissioners. It certainly sheds significant light on the cultural sophistication of the Innsbruck court, but it does not tell us much about late medieval ‘Austrian’ literature or identity, apart from the fact that Emperor Maximilian continued to pursue a very traditional perspective regarding Middle High German literature, which by itself, however, mirrors, after all, a rather modern approach to his own self, *memoria*.

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41. See, for instance, Wendelin Schmidt-Dengler, Johann Sonnleitner, and Klaus Zeyringer (Ed.), Donald G. Daviau, and Herbert Arit (Ed.), *Geschichte der österreichischen Literatur* (St. Ingbert: Röhrig Universitätsverlag, 1996); Rosa Marta Gómez Pato, and Jaime Feijóo (Ed.) *Literatur aus Österreich – zum Problem der Norm und der Devianz. Wendelin Schmidt-Dengler in memoriam* (Frankfurt a. M., Berlin, et al.: Peter Lang, 2011); Katya Krylova (Ed.), *New Perspectives on Contemporary Austrian Literature and Culture* (Oxford, Bern, et al.: Peter Lang, 2018). The literature on this topic is legion, as to be expected.

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