On the Impact of the Merseburg Incantations

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While searching for medieval manuscripts suitable for the "Monumenta Germaniae Historica" (a collection of German historical sources) in 1841, Georg Waitz visited the library of the Merseburg Cathedral (Jankofsky, 2013). Rather coincidentally, he found a page with two magic spells in a theological composite manuscript: the Merseburg Incantations (see Fig. 1). Realizing the importance of his discovery, he asked Jacob Grimm to analyze and evaluate the text. The first Merseburg Incantation is a *blessing of release* telling about "Idisen" (female dieties) freeing either themselves or captured warriors from chains. The second Merseburg Incantation is a *healing spell* to cure a dislocated horse foot. The spells in Old High German were written down in the 10th century, but their origin is still unclear, maybe several hundred years earlier. The first time publicly presented at the Royal Prussian Academy of Sciences in Berlin, Jacob Grimm denoted the value of the Merseburg Incantations by calling them a gem, and nothing from the most popular libraries would have a similar value (Grimm, 1842).
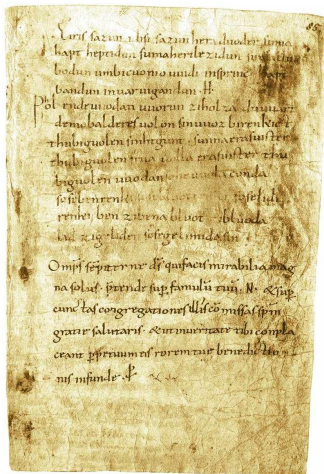

Figure 1: Merseburg Incantations manuscript

A number of works interpret content, meaning and origin of the Merseburg Incantations (e.g., Schumacher, 2000, Beck, 2003, and Schmitt, 2011). In contrast to these rather profound analyses and interpretations of the Merseburg Incantations, our project aims at examining their global impact. We therefore design a platform that brings together various types of sources––tagged with citation year, source type, reference purpose––citing the Merseburg Incantations. Some examples are listed below.

Sources citing the first Merseburg Incantation:

- "Die Südharzreise", Frank Fischer, 2010, travelog
- "Mara und der Feuerbringer, Band 03: Götterdämmerung", Tommy Krappweis, 2012, novel
- "Angelina Jolie - The Lightning Star", C. Duthel, 2012, biography
- "Seelenriss: Depression und Leistungsdruck", Ines Geipel, 2013, psychology
- "Das siebte Buch: Objektorientierung mit C++", Ernst-Erich Doberkat, 2013, programming
- "Die Schwarzen Musketiere - Das Buch der Nacht", Oliver Pötzsch, 2015, novel
- "Charlemagne", Johannes Fried and Peter Lewis, 2016, historiography

Sources citing the second Merseburg Incantation:

- "The Key to Music's Genetics: Why Music is Part of Being Human", Christian Lehmann, 2014, musicology (example for healing through singing)
- "Ring of the Nibelungs", German dubbing, 2004, TV Movie (entertainment)
- "Die Leute vom Domplatz", Episode 1, 1979, German TV Series (entertainment)
- "To Ride a White Horse", Pamela Ford, 2015, novel
- "Healing Symbols in Psychotherapy: A Ritual Approach", Erik D. Goodwyn, 2016, psychology
- "Harzer Pferdezucht im Spiegel der Geschichte", Bernd Sternal, 2015, horse breeding
- "Metallische Implantate in der Knochenchirurgie", Erich Frank and Herbert Zitter, 1971, medicine (bone surgery)

- "Norse Magical and Herbal Healing", Ben Waggoner, 2011, medicine (medieval medical text collection)

Sources citing both Merseburg Incantations:

- "Handbuch der germanischen Philologie", Friedrich Stroh, 1985, philology
- "Götter und Kulte der Germanen", Rudolf Simek, 2004, mythology
- A number of music songs, e.g., performed by In Extremo, Saltatio Mortis, Corvus Corax or Tibetréa, music (entertainment)
- Merseburg Incantations Geocache, https://opencaching.de/OC07B5, since 2004, geocaching puzzle

Although this is only a tiny snapshot of sources referring to the Merseburg Incantations, some tendencies are already visible. Whereas both Merseburg Incantations are cited in a number of books on mythology and philology (only one of each category is listed above), there are also some differences dependent on the spell contents, e.g., historiography for the first spell, and medicine for the second. Next to these reasonable source types, there are also unexpected findings like programming for the first spell, and horse breeding for the second. Both Merseburg Incantations are also often used for entertainment purposes in the form of novels, in music songs, or in movies. Also an interesting finding is a Geocaching puzzle guiding to a Geocache that is hidden in Merseburg.

The project is designed as a two-stage student internship, where Masters students of the humanities and computer science collaboratively work together in order to gain experiences for future digital humanities projects. The first step is data acquisition, which is performed by humanities students. Although web search engines, e.g., platforms with digitized contents such as Google Books or Internet Archive for textual sources, are the entry points for data acquisition, data extraction and structuring is done manually to ensure high data quality and to capture the purpose of the reference as precisely as possible. For example, we extract detailed information about the context in which a spell is cited, e.g., in the biography about Angelina Jolie the first Merseburg Incantation is referenced in a movie description of Beowulf, in which Angelina Jolie partook as a supporting actress. The second step of our project is the development of an interactive visualization system to support the dynamic exploration of the data collection. Therefore, computer science students design several visual interfaces that summarize different metadata information (e.g., a timeline to visualize the temporal impact, or a tag cloud to illustrate source types). One of the major functions of the system is a comparative view on the different contexts in which the Merseburg Incantations are cited together and each of them individually. Although the data is collected in a time limited project, the system is designed as a web-based crowdsourcing platform, so that the database can be extended after the project. A specific feature of the system is genericity, which makes it applicable to other texts in question. For example, creating a collection of citations of the Trierer Zaubersprüche or the Hildebrandslied will be possible, also in the form of a comparative analysis.

An interpretive approach using our proposed system will be complicated due to the fact that the collection contains serious scholarly as well as artistical references, and it is not possible to draw a clear line between such groups. Also, we consider each citation as equally relevant, which might not evolve a convincing representation of impact. While it is furthermore not possible to collect "all" citations, supporting hypotheses generation after distant reading analyses is not the prior purpose of our system. Our aim is rather to establish a starting point for exploring the far-reaching significance of the Merseburg Incantations––one of the most important written samples of German language, even the oldest and only known preserved text about Germanic Paganism in Old High German. With our project, we want to fulfill the responsibility to sustainably highlight this uniqueness.

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