

THE FRENCH AND GERMAN CHILDREN CRUSADES (1212), THE LEGEND OF THE PIED PIPER

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7/6/2023

“Repentance too late profits not.”

INTRODUCTION

The children's crusade was supposedly launched in 1212 by a 12-year-old French boy: Stephan de Cloyes, of Vendôme in France, and by Nicholas of Köln in Germany. Many historians doubt that this crusade ever occurred and that they were legends that resurfaced over time for instance in the tale of the Pied Piper as medieval folklore. It inspired a Goethe verse, “Der Rattenfänger”; a Grimm Brothers’ legend, “The Children of Hamelin”; and one of Robert Browning’s best-known poems, “The Pied Piper of Hamelin.” Hamelin is a touristic town of 60,000 inhabitants in Lower Saxony, Germany [1].

If true, they were some of the strangest and most tragic events in the history of the crusades. It is claimed that more than 50,000 young boys and girls about the age of twelve years and upwards became convinced that they could conquer Jerusalem. They believed God would deliver the Holy City to them because they were poor, innocent, and faithful.

They expected God to part the waters of the Mediterranean Sea for them like the waters of the Red Sea for Moses, so that they could cross safely to Jerusalem. As a result, 50,000 children may have sadly perished at their young age of hunger, disease or were even captured and sold into slavery by unscrupulous Venetian merchants. None of them is reported to have ever reached the Holy Land.



Figure 1. Carving of Shepherd Children at the Chartres cathedral, France.

FRENCH CHILDREN'S CRUSADE (1212)

INTRODUCTION

King Philippe of France used to hold his court at the abbey of Saint Denis. As described by Stephen Runciman, one day in May 1212 a young shepherd boy named Stephan from the town of Cloyes in the Orleannais brought a letter to the king. The boy, who was 12 years of age, said that the letter was given to him by Christ in person, who had appeared to him while he was tending his sheep, and asked him to preach for a new crusade. With a peasant's background, he would have been illiterate, unable to neither read nor write, yet at his age he would have had experience with basic work around a farm. King Philippe was unimpressed and kindly asked him to go home and come back to participate in the crusades when he gets older. But this did not swat the young shepherd from continuing the preaching. A carving of the Shepherd children crusaders at the Chartres cathedral in France is shown in Fig. 1.

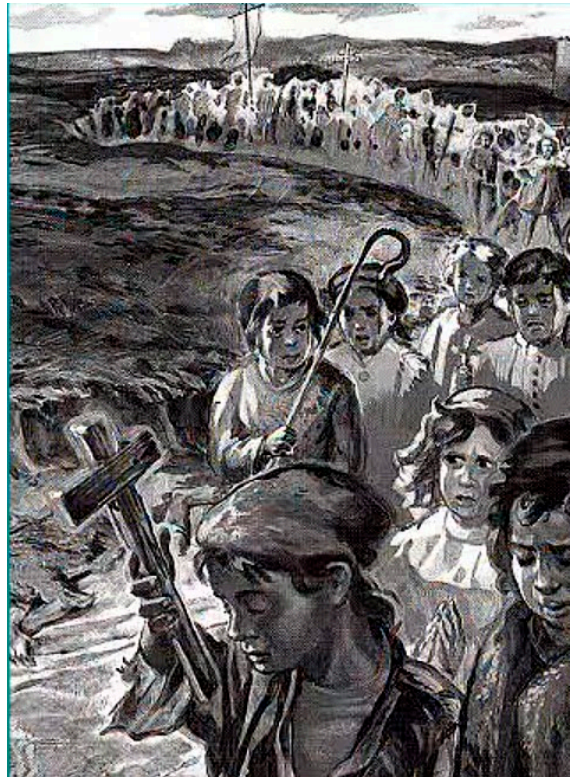


Figure 2. Depiction of the Children's crusade.

TRIP TO THE HOLY LAND

The French priesthood was not so sure, but cautiously did not discourage young Stephan's endeavor. The belief was that the children would be protected by God who loved them, and because of this protection, they would be able to get to the Holy Land and take

Jerusalem for the Christians from the Moslems. For the past fifteen years, preachers had been urging a crusade against the Moslems of the East or of Spain or just against the heretic Christians at Languedoc in France. The Christian Church could not bless a crusade that was doomed to failure, but it also was not able to stop it. It is possible that the Church hierarchy thought that the actions of the children might shame then reluctant kings and emperors into getting a proper crusade started to capture Jerusalem.

Stephan of Cloyes wanted to emulate Peter the Hermit whose prowess had reached a legendary reputation in the last century. The boy, who was gifted with great eloquence, started preaching at the entrance of the Abbey of Saint Denis. He announced that he would lead a crusade of children to the Holy Land. Like Moses in the Old Testament, the Mediterranean Sea would dry in front of them. Maybe because the preachers had prepared the minds of people for the last fifteen years, the older folks were impressed, and children came flocking to his call. He then set out on a journey around France summoning more children, and many of his children converts also went in all directions spreading the word that they would all meet at Vendôme after about a month in June 1212 and start out to the Holy Land.

THE ORIFLAMME BANNER

Admiring contemporaries in their chronicles called the children crusaders “minor prophets” and suggested that about thirty thousand children around the age of twelve showed up near the end in June at Vendôme. Maybe there were a few thousand there from all parts of France and of different walks of life. Some were simple peasants whose parents had willingly let them go on foot on a great mission. There were some anxious mothers accompanying them. There were children of nobility who had slipped away from their parents and came riding horses. There were also some young priests, girls, a few older pilgrims who were drawn by piety, by pity, and some to share in the gifts that the populace showered on the gathering. Bands came into town with their leaders carrying copies of the Oriflamme banner, which Stephen adopted as the slogan of the crusade, and camped outside the town.

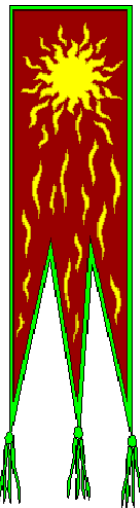


Figure 3. The Oriflamme, or gold flame banner.

The Oriflamme was the sacred banner of the Abbey of Saint Denis. It accompanied the French kings in their major battles, starting with Louis VI campaign against Emperor Henry V in 1121. The banner's last appearance was at the battle of Maupertuis near Poitiers in 1356 where the bearer was killed, and the flag disappeared. Some later appearances of the banner were reported. It should not be confused with the French kings' royal standard which consists of the gold fleur-de-lis or lily flower on blue which accompanied the Oriflamme on major campaigns. The Oriflamme is as a crimson silk vexillum with three tails, green fringe, and tassels as shown in Fig. 3.

After friendly priests blessed them, and the sorrowful parents left, the march started southward toward the cities of Tours, Lyons and Marseilles, mostly on foot, but some on horses, and the leader Stephan in a decorated cart with a canopy shading him from the sun. He was treated like a saint, and locks of his hair and pieces of his clothing were distributed as religious relics. It was a hot and droughty summer with scarce water, leaving little room for food charity from the farmers along the way. Sadly, many of the children died along the way, many wisely dropped out and wandered back home, and the doomed rest of them reached the city of Marseilles on the Mediterranean Sea.

MISFORTUNE AND TREACHERY

The people of Marseilles were kind to the survivors, lodging and feeding them. The next morning was the great day where they rushed to the harbor to watch the sea open-up in front of them. A bitter disappointment ensued when the anticipated miracle sadly did not occur. Some of the children turned their disappointment against their leader Stephan, accusing him of betraying them, and started back home, but many others stayed by the seashore hoping that the miracle would occur the next day. A few days later, two merchants of Marseilles: Hugh the Iron and William the Pig, offered to hire and place seven ships at their disposal to carry them to Palestine. Stephan accepted the generous offer and those that remained set sail. Eighteen full years passed before there was any news about them.



Figure 4. Ship at the time of the crusades.



Figure 5. Children crusaders at the ships.

What may have happened to them was reported by one of the young priests who encouraged and accompanied them. He showed up in the year 1230 from the East at Marseilles and told a curious tale worthy of a Hollywood movie complete with sequels. After sailing for a few days, they encountered bad weather and two of the ships were wrecked on the island of San Pietro off the southwest corner of the island of Sardinia, and all their passengers perished. The five ships that survived the storm found themselves surrounded by a pirates' squadron of ships from North Africa, and they were all taken as prisoners.

Not quite, it seems that the young crusaders were brought there by arrangement by the two merchants who provided them with the ships and sold them to the pirates into captivity. They were taken to Bougie on the Algerian coast where some of them were sold to spend the rest of their lives there, and the others, including the young priests who were literate and well-educated, were taken to Egypt, where they would fetch a better price. At Alexandria most of them were acquired by the governor to work on his estate. At this point, there were still seven hundreds of them. A small group was taken to Baghdad to be sold at its slave market.

The most fortunate of them were the most literate, particularly the young priests. The ruler of Egypt, King Al Adel's (The Just) son Al Kamil (The Perfect) was very enlightened and was interested in the Western languages and letters. He kept the young priests in his entourage at his court as interpreters and made no attempt to forcefully convert them from their Christian faith. They stayed comfortably at his palace, and this single priest escaped or was allowed to return to France. He told all he knew to the parents of the young crusaders, and probably out of guilt for encouraging the venture, faded into obscurity.

A later story suggested that a few years later, the two merchants of Marseilles were hung after a failed attempt at kidnapping the German Emperor Frederick II for delivery to the pirates from North Africa.

There is no proof for the authenticity of the priest's story since none of the other children ever returned to corroborate it. As a priest, however, it is unlikely that he would have knowingly told a lie. Priests at the time would have possessed a strong belief in God's omnipresence everywhere and His all-powerful omnipotence. They would have believed that if they told a lie, they would have been condemned to hell. However, he could have told his story in good faith after hearing it from a third party.

THE GERMAN CHILDREN'S CRUSADE (1212)

Not to be outdone by their French counterparts, a few weeks after the start of the French children crusade, the Germans started their own, under the leadership of a young boy called Nicholas from a Rhineland village. He started his preaching at the shrine of the Three Kings at Köln or Cologne. He also claimed that the sea will open-up for them like it did for Moses in the Old Testament, and that the children are destined to do better than older people, because of God's love for them and His protection.

There was a distinct difference though: whereas the French children intending to conquer the Holy Land by force, the German children believed that they would reach their aim by peaceful conversion of the Moslem infidels. The German children were apparently slightly older and more mature than the French. The crusade included religious men and unmarried women, so it was not strictly a children's crusade.

They gathered at Cologne in Germany and started for Rome in Italy with a significant contingent from the nobility, and several vagabonds benefiting from the gifts bestowed on the crusaders by the admiring populace.

They split into two parties. Twenty thousand of them led by Nicholas, set out up the Rhine River to Basel, to west Switzerland, to Geneva to cross the Alps by the Mont Cenis pass. Mont Cenis (Italian: Moncenisio) is a massif and is believed by some authors to have been the pass used by Hannibal to cross the Alps mountain range.

They incurred heavy losses on an arduous journey, and only one third of them made it to Genoa, Italy, at the end of August 1212. The Genoese initially ready to welcome them, changed their minds, and suspicious of a possible German ploy to take over their city, allowed them only a single night's stay.

The next morning, at the seashore, just like the French children, the sea did not divide for them as they expected. Many of the children, disillusioned, accepted an offer by the Genoese to stay and become Genoese citizens, forgetting about their crusade. Later, several famous families in Genoa claimed that they are descendants of these disillusioned young crusaders migrants.

Nicholas and the larger number of young crusaders reasoned that maybe the sea will open for them elsewhere, and they proceeded on their way to Pisa. Two ships bound for Palestine agreed to take some of the children on board. Nothing is known about their fate. They may or may not have reached Palestine.

Nicholas with the rest of them continued towards Rome, where they were received by Pope Innocent. Their piety moved him, but their obvious folly embarrassed him, and with kind firmness advised them to go home, until they grow up, when they could then join

the adult crusaders. Many of the girls could not handle the return journey and they settled at Italian towns or villages along the way. Next spring, only a few stragglers found their way back to the Rhineland. Nicholas was not among them. The angry parents of the children who perished or disappeared had to place the blame on somebody. They directed their anger and ire at Nicholas' father as a scapegoat, had him arrested, accused him to have encouraged the boy out of vain glory and material gain, had him tried and promptly hung.

The second group of German children crusaders went to Italy through central Switzerland and over the Saint Gotthard reaching the sea at Ancona. Unfortunately, the Mediterranean Sea there also failed to divide for them to cross it to Palestine. They moved down the coast to Brindisi, where a few of them found ships sailing to Palestine and headed there, whilst the others wandered back home. Only a few of them eventually reached their homes and were much luckier than their French counterparts.

LEGEND OF THE PIED PIPER

INTRODUCTION

A positive correlation exists between the legend of the Pied Piper which involves the tragic and unexplained disappearance of young children from different European cities and their possible participation in the children's crusades.

It may also be related to the tragic loss of the European children to the plague pandemic, which explains the Pied Piper's scaring away the rats, which carried the fleas that were the vector spreading the deadly disease.

BUBONIC PLAGUE PANDEMIC AT THE TIMES OF THE CRUSADES

The bubonic plague, named on account of the purplish to black glandular swellings or "buboes" that characterize it, reached a pandemic state at Medieval times. The most prominent outbreak occurred in the late 1340s is estimated to have killed about one third of the known world population from Europe to India. Priests were afraid to offer the last rites to dying people from fear of contacting it.

Those who through their genes were immune to it and appeared to have been exposed to the disease without contacting it, were accused of witchcraft, and blamed for the disease. This led some of the lucky survivors to another unhappy ending of being burnt at the stake for alleged witchcraft. The irony is that most of the existing world population survived the disease because of its special genetic makeup resisting it. Some rare individuals who possess immunity to the AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome) virus may be carrier of resistance genes from those survivors.



Figure 6. Bubonic plague wiped out half of humanity in Europe.

The spread of the disease was caused by unsanitary living conditions in the European Medieval cities which favored the spread of rodents which in turn harbored the fleas that were the vector spreading the disease. Without these unsanitary conditions, the disease had no chance of spreading. As a proof for this argument, the bubonic plague is at this date endemic in the rodents' population in the western USA. Yet it is well-confined to the rodents population and rarely affects humans in only a few cases per year, because of the good sanitation in the human population. Anecdotal accounts exist about some uninformed individuals who catch it every year upon feeding the cute-looking ground squirrels or chipmunks rodents which end up biting the feeding hands and transmitting the disease to them.

At the time of the crusades, people of the Jewish faith were congregated in enclosed and overcrowded ghettos in Europe. Even though that would have in principle favored the spread of the plague, their observance of the Levitical codes of cleanliness and purity limited the population of rodents which harbored the flea vectors of the disease in their dwellings. This was not the case in other Medieval towns and castles where the rodents and fleas propagated abundantly. Ignorance suggested that if the Jewish ghetto did not get the plague like the surrounding towns and villages, this was conveniently construed to be an indication that they are in league with the devil. This was used as a pretext for blaming and persecuting them.

The ignorance in Medieval Europe reached a stage such that anybody who kept a cat, which kept the rodents at bay and controlled their population, may not get the plague but then might be accused of witchcraft and hung or burnt at the stake. Ironically cats which would have kept the pandemic at bay, particularly black cats were decimated since they were thought to be witches in disguise that roamed the landscape after dark. Independent women living alone with mental conditions or without the protection of a father, child or a husband were vulnerable to accusations of witchcraft and faced the penalty of being hung or burnt at the stake. In times of crisis like the spread of the plague, angry mobs become uncontrollable taking the law into their own hands and exercising their fanaticism while the civil and religious authorities tacitly approve of their abuses to those they falsely accused, and conveniently look the other way.

VERSIONS OF THE PIED PIPER LEGEND

The legend of the Pied Piper of the German city of Hameln (Fig. 7) is claimed to be the most famous of German legends, and it is known in different forms around the globe.



Figure 7. City of Hameln, Germany with half-timbered houses; 16th Century burgher manors encrusted with Gothic gables and scrollwork, and flamboyant wedding cake buildings offering prime examples of the local Weser-Renaissance architecture, all leering gargoyles and brightly colored polychrome wood carvings.

A short version of the legend is told by Jonas Kuhn as:

“In 1284, the town of Hameln is suffering from a terrible plague of rats. The town council tries everything to get rid of them -- without success. At last, the mayor promises 1,000 florins to the one who can put an end to the plague.

A stranger dressed in bright red and yellow clothes shows up and says he can rid Hameln of the rats. At night, the stranger starts to play a soft tune on a flute, luring all the rats out of the houses and barns towards the river Weser, where they drown.

The mayor refuses to pay the piper: 'Playing a tune on a flute is not worth 1,000 florins. Get out of Hameln.'

But the piper returns on a Sunday morning, when all the grown-ups are at church. Again, he starts to play a tune on his flute. This time, all the children follow him, as he walks out of the gate to the mountains. Suddenly, a cave opens in the mountain. The piper walks into the mountain, still followed by the children, and the cave closes again.

The children were never seen again in Hameln."

An alternate version of the Hameln pied piper legend from the Brothers Grimm's book: "German Legends" goes as follows:

"It was the year 1284 when a strange and wondrous figure arrived in Hameln. He was attired in a coat of many colors and was taken to be a rat catcher, as he promised to free the town of a plague of rats and mice for a fixed sum of money. The citizens pledged to pay him his fee, so the visitor produced a pipe and began to play. Soon all the rats and mice came running out of the houses and gathered around the Pied Piper in a teeming mass. Once convinced that each and every one followed, he went out of the town straight into the River Weser where the vermin plunged after him and drowned. The townspeople, however, now freed of the plague, regretted their promise and refused to pay the Piper, who left Hameln in a bitter mood.

On the 26th of June in that year he returned, this time dressed as a huntsman, wearing a grim countenance and a wondrous red hat. While the townsfolk were assembled in the church, he again sounded his pipe in the streets. But it was not rats and mice that came out this time, but children. A great many boys and girls older than four came running and were led through the Ostertor gate into the very heart of a hill where they all disappeared. Only two children returned because they could not keep up: one was blind and could not show where the others had gone, the other dumb and not able to tell the secret. A last little boy had come back to fetch his coat and so escaped the calamity. Some tell that the children were led into a great cavern and reappeared in Transylvania. A total of 130 children were lost."

A yet more picturesque account of the Hameln version of the legend is:

"Once upon a time, on the banks of a great river in the north of Germany lay a town called Hameln. The citizens of Hameln were honest folk who lived contentedly in their grey stone houses. The years went by, and the town grew very rich. Then one day, an extraordinary thing happened to disturb the peace. Hameln had always had rats and a lot too. But they had never been a danger, for the cats had always solved the rat problem in the usual way; by killing them. All at once, however, the rats began to multiply. In the end, a black sea of rats swarmed over the whole town.

First, they attacked the barns and storehouses, then, for lack of anything better, they gnawed the wood, cloth or anything at all. The one thing they did not eat was metal. The terrified citizens flocked to plead with the town councilors to free them from the plague of rats. But the council had, for a long time, been sitting in the mayor's room, trying to think of a plan. 'What we need is an army of cats.' But all the cats were dead. 'We shall put down poisoned food then.' But most of the food was already gone and even poison did not stop the rats. 'It just cannot be done without help' said the mayor sadly. Just then, while the citizens milled around outside there was a loud knock at the door. 'Who can that be?' the city fathers wondered uneasily, mindful of the angry crowds. They gingerly opened the door. And to their surprise, there stood a tall thin man dressed in brightly colored clothes, with a long feather in his hat, and waving a gold pipe at them. 'I have freed other towns of beetles and bats,' the stranger announced, 'and for a thousand florins, I shall rid you of your rats.' 'A thousand florins,' exclaimed the mayor. 'We shall give you fifty thousand if you succeed.' At once the stranger hurried away, saying: 'It is late now, but at dawn tomorrow, there would not be a rat left in Hameln.'

The sun was still below the horizon when the sound of a pipe wafted through the streets of Hameln. The pied piper slowly made his way through the houses and behind him flocked the rats. Out they scampered from doors, windows and gutters, rats of every size, all after the piper. And as he played, the stranger marched down to the river and straight into the water, up to his middle. Behind him swarmed the rats and everyone was drowned and swept away by the current. By the time the sun was high in the sky, there was not a single rat in the town.

There was even greater delight at the town hall, until the piper tried to claim his payment. 'Fifty thousand florins?' exclaimed the councilors, 'Never.' 'A thousand florins at least!' cried the pied piper angrily. But the mayor broke in: 'The rats are all dead now and they can never come back. So be grateful for fifty florins, or you will not get even that.' His eyes flashing with rage, the pied piper pointed a threatening finger at the mayor. 'You will bitterly regret ever breaking your promise,' he said, and vanished. A shiver of fear ran through the councilors, but the mayor shrugged and said excitedly: 'We have saved fifty thousand florins.' That night, freed from the nightmare of the rats, the citizens of Hameln slept more soundly than ever.

And when the strange sound of piping wafted through the streets at dawn, only the children heard it. Drawn, as by magic, they hurried out of their homes. Again, the pied piper paced through the town, this time, it was children of all sizes that flocked at his heels to the sound of his strange piping. The long procession soon left the town and made its way through the wood and across the forest till it reached the foot of a huge mountain. When the piper came to the dark rock, he played his pipe even louder still and a great door creaked open. Beyond laid a cave. In trooped the children behind the pied piper, and when the last child had gone into the darkness,

the door reeked shut. A great landslide came down the mountain blocking the entrance to the cave forever. Only one little lame boy escaped this fate. It was he who told the anxious citizens, searching for their children, what had happened. And no matter what people did, the mountain never gave up its victims.

Many years were to pass before the merry voices of other children would ring through the streets of Hameln but the memory of the harsh lesson lingered in everyone's heart and was passed down from father to son through the centuries.”

In this version of the legend, the young children’s disappearance is associated with the story of the piper (Fig. 8) who magically eliminates the rats and mice from the town. This was important to a milling town that was subjected to the plague at Medieval times. The rodents carried the fleas that were the vector spreading the plague.



Figure 8. Painted Glass Windows showing the pied piper and the disappeared children at Hameln.

ISLAMIC CULTURE ORIGIN OF THE PIED PIPER TALE

The origin of the legend could have been brought back to Europe by the crusaders who visited Syria, as a story from Halab or Aleppo, a northern city in Syria. The story is attributed to Avicenna or Ibn Sina (Son of Sinai) who was the most influential philosopher and scientist of Medieval Islam. He was of Persian heritage, was born in the year 980 in Bukhara, Iran and died in 1037 in Hamadan. The Avicenna story about the mice plague at Aleppo has a moral to the effect that: “Repentance too late profits not,” goes as follows:

“In the city of Aleppo there was a king. As mice abounded in that city, the people complained of them every day. One day, while the king was conversing with Avicenna, they touched upon the mice. The king said, ‘O Avicenna, everyone complains of these mice. Would that we could find some remedy for them that everyone might be at ease?’

Avicenna answered, 'I will make it happen that not a single one of them remain in this city. But with this condition, that you stand at the city gate, and beware, whatever wonder you see, *that you not laugh*.'

The king consented and was glad. Straightway he ordered that they prepare his horse, and he mounted and went to the gate.

Avicenna, on his part, stood in a street and repeated a charm and called the mice. One of the mice came, and he caught it and killed it and put it in a coffin and made four mice bear that coffin. Then he repeated the charm and began to strike his hands one against the other; and these four mice began to march slowly along. And all the mice that were in the city attended that funeral, so that the streets were filled full of them. They came to the gate where the king was standing, some of them before the coffin and some of them behind. And while the king was looking on, he saw these mice with the coffin on their shoulders, and, unable to resist, *he laughed*. As soon as he laughed, the mice that were outside the gate all died, but those that were within the gate dispersed and ran off inside.

Avicenna said, 'O king, if you had kept my counsel and *not laughed*, not a single mouse would have remained in this city, but all of them would have gone out and died. And everyone would have been at ease.'

And the king repented of his having laughed. But what could he do? *Repentance too late profits not.*"

RELATIONSHIP TO THE CHILDREN'S CRUSADE

If it is plausibly surmised that the children leaving the town were attracted to the children's crusades, and never returning back, we deduce the pied piper German version of the legend. In fact, in one of the German accounts of the legend, the children are specifically:

1. Leaving on a ship for a trip on the Danube River away from their town lured by some impostor represented by the pied piper,
2. Are taken to some far away land, where they are sold into slavery in the slave markets of Constantinople.

The children crusaders in fact would have left on ships and were lured by shoddy characters who sold them into slavery. This account, which matches what is known about the children's crusades, is related to what is considered as a more factual story reported by Friedrich Umlauf about "The rat catcher from Magdalenagrund." The story is reported as follows:

"The city of Korneuburg adjacent to Vienna was conquered by the Swedes during the Thirty Years' War in 1646. However, following an occupation of six months it was taken back by the imperial forces. The city had by that time expanded substantially, but many of its buildings lay buried in rubble. Vermin, especially rats, multiplied beneath the ruins of the

destroyed buildings until no cellar and no food storage room was safe from their devastation. Neither cats, nor traps, nor poison could bring them under control, and the city's inhabitants felt forced to flee.

A public meeting of the town council was held to decide once and for all whether to attempt continued but futile resistance against the animals or to simply abandon one's belongings, which in truth were no longer belongings at all.

There were spirited arguments back and forth when suddenly and unexpectedly a man stepped before the judge's bench and stated that he possessed the means to put an end to the city's plague. No one knew him, but his offer was accepted with loud acclaim. Everyone looked forward with fond anticipation to the next morning when the promised rescue was to take place. In return for his deed the rescuer was to be paid a large sum of money.

As the cock crowed the man did indeed enter at the gate. He was wearing an unusual hunting outfit and carrying a very large hunter's bag. He pulled from the bag a small black transverse flute, upon which he played mournful melodies. Hordes of rats and mice followed the pipe's sound, emerging in great masses from their holes in every corner of every house in the city. They followed the flute player, who walked directly toward the Danube. There he stepped into a boat and continuing to play the flute, rode to the middle of the stream. Irresistibly attracted to the music, the rats attempted to swim after him, but they all drowned in the river's raging current. Thus Korneuburg was saved.

The piper now returned and asked for the agreed payment. Someone asked him who he was. 'I came here from Vienna,' he said, 'because I heard of your need. My name is Hans Mousehole, and I am the official rat killer of Magdalenagrund (a former suburb of Vienna, now part of the Mariahilf district).'

'Any fool can say that', answered a most wise councilman. 'We know full well that your help is not of this world. Are you in league with the Evil One? Now see here, there is no obligation to keep one's word with black magicians or kobolds, so just take your leave, or we will turn you over to a witches' court.'

'My dear people,' replied the rat catcher, 'your sense of honor is remarkable, for it seems to be directed at saving you money. But hear me out. You have no right to question the means by which I saved your city from the plague. It is sufficient that it is free. I have no intention of allowing myself to be chased out of your city, and I am even less inclined to reveal to you the inner workings of my deeds, which seemed so miraculous to you. Take note that there are not merely evil, but also good higher powers. I used the latter to do good for you, for good things can come only from that which is good. But if you ungrateful people cheat me out of my well-earned pay then you will come to know the evil powers as well. Thus take heed of my final word. In your city there is a recess in the wall of the house not far

from the church and at its right side. Place the payment we agreed upon there before the next dawn. If you fail to do so, I will find my own reward.'

He departed, followed by the loud and derisive laughter of the councilmen. It should come as no surprise that the next morning there was no money lying in the niche.

With the sun's first rays Korneuburg experienced its own drama. Hans Mousehole, dressed in a purple-red robe and playing a golden flute, stood at the marketplace in front of the town hall. The melodious tunes that he evoked from his instrument must have sounded like music from heaven to the children, for they gathered about the mysterious musician with joyful haste. Still playing, he walked toward the Danube, where a large and handsome ship awaited him.

Led by the flute player, the procession boarded the ship. Its sails billowed, and it floated out to the middle of the stream.

This time the rat catcher did not return. To the contrary, the ship sailed further and further from the city, and neither it nor any who were aboard were ever seen there again.

Many years later the horrified citizens of Korneuburg received news that in that same year a large number of children had been placed up for sale in the slave markets of Constantinople. They had no doubt that the children were theirs, and they rued their lack of honor, but too late.

History has recorded that Korneuburg was freed of rats at the time stated above and by a rat catcher from Vienna in the manner described. Until not long ago there was a small rectangular marble plaque on a house in Pfarrgäßchen Street. On it could be seen an upright rat, a weathered gothic inscription, and the designation of a year, of which only the number IV could be made out. Also, in remembrance of the event, herdsman from the area called their cattle and sheep together by cracking a whip instead of blowing on a cow horn.

Rats returned to the area with the great flood of 1801. Since then, herdsman have given their signals with a horn, as they had done ages ago."

This story of the abducted children, which bears a close resemblance to the legend of the Rat Catcher of Hameln, is more plausibly based on some actual events. An old illustration of the pied piper attracting the rodents is shown in Fig. 9. Ultrasound generators are contemporarily used for pests deterrence, particularly including rodents.

Other explanations of the reason for the children's disappearance other than their having been lured into joining the children's crusade where they were sold into slavery, abound. It may well be that during the sad times of the Thirty Years War, some flashily dressed army piper enticed the city's youth into military service and led them away with him, and that none of the young recruits returned, because they met death on the battle fields of Europe. This story is less plausible than the children's crusade explanation since news of their death would have been conveyed back to their families. It is also improbable that all of them did not return from the war. A few could have survived and returned home.

An interpretation presented by Kadushin [1] is:

“The theories are legion, according to Wibke Reimer, project coordinator at the Hameln Museum who has been organizing a special exhibit that focuses on the global reach of the Pied Piper legend. One of the leading current theories suggests the town’s youth were part of a migration of Germans to Eastern Europe fueled by an economic depression.

“In this scenario,” Reimer said, “the Pied Piper played the role of a so-called locator or recruiter. They were responsible for organizing migrations to the east and were said to have worn colorful garments and played an instrument to attract the attention of possible settlers.”

While some historians believe that the youth emigrated to Transylvania, the German linguist Jürgen Udolph’s theory is most accepted. “He suggests the regions around Berlin as the most probable location, in an area that’s now [Eastern Germany],” Reimer said, “and he backs up his theory by place name evidence.” In fact, Udolph found that the family names common in Hamelin at the time show up with surprising frequency in the areas of Uckermark and Prignitz, near Berlin, that he locates as the center of the migration. The theory is also reinforced by evidence that the region, newly liberated from the Danes, was ripe for German colonization.”



Figure 9. Illustration showing the pied piper attracting the rodents with his magic pipe.

Yet another interpretation based on “Huntington’s Chorea” disease [1]:

“More intriguing is a theory that points to the medieval phenomenon of “dancing mania”, driven by a succession of pandemics and natural disasters. Known as St Vitus’ Dance, the dancing plague is documented surfacing in continental Europe as early as the 11th Century. A form of mass hysteria, the dance could spread from individuals to large groups, all driven by an unshakeable compulsion to dance feverishly, sometimes for weeks, often leaping and singing and sometimes hallucinating to the point of exhaustion and occasionally death, like a top that can’t stop spinning.

And, in fact, one 13th Century outbreak – a literal form of dance fever – occurred south of Hamelin, in the town of Erfurt, where a group of youths were documented as wildly gyrating as they travelled out of town, ending up 20 km away in a neighboring town. Some of the children, one chronicle suggests, expired shortly thereafter, having flat-out danced themselves to death, and those who survived were left with chronic tremors. Perhaps, some theorize, Hamelin witnessed a similar plague, dancing to the figurative tune of the Piper.”

OTHER INTERPRETATIONS

Other theories are even less plausible since they concentrate on the fictional legend of the city of Hameln rather than on the more factual account of the city of Korneuburg reported above. Also by negligence or by design, the tale was changed around 1500 into a mythical, magical legend and even the historians do not know exactly what happened.

Jonas Kuhn reports the following interpretations by different people:

1. Gottfried Leibnitz may have been the closest to the reality when he suggested that the children took part in a crusade to the holy land.
2. Von Zimmern and Fincelius suggested for the first time that the pied piper was an allegoric representation of the Devil.
3. Werner Ueffing concluded that the Hameln children contacted the black plague and had to be led out of the town to protect the rest of the town.
4. Johannes Letzner related in the Corvey Chronic that the youths were afflicted with the dancing disease, known today as Huntington’s Chorea, and were led away to protect the populace from infection.
5. Wilhelm Raabe quoted Christian Fein’s older theory that the youths of Hameln were lost at the battle of Sedemuender in 1260, and this was the accepted historical version until 1951.
6. Wilhelm Wann and Heinrich Spanuth reported through separate research theses that the 130 children built new villages in Maehren in Czechoslovakia or Oelmütz in the Czech Republic and Serbia. Each was awarded a doctorate for their respective works.
7. Hans Dobbartin suggests that the group’s ship sank in the Baltic Sea after traveling on foot to the Johanniter cloister, Cophahn.
8. Gottfried Spanuth makes the unsupported claim that 130 young people died as a bridge collapsed.
9. Hannibal Nullejus is supported in his theory by the Brothers Grimm and Robert Browning account that the children went to Siebenburgen in Transsylvania.
10. Waltraud Woeller claimed that the children died in a landslide on the Ith Mountain.
11. Gernot Huesam added the precise position as the Teufelskueche, an area of collapse on the mountain known today as the Oberberg.
12. Juergen Udolph presented a theory in 1996 that the travelers went to the Uckermark area of Germany, north of Berlin.

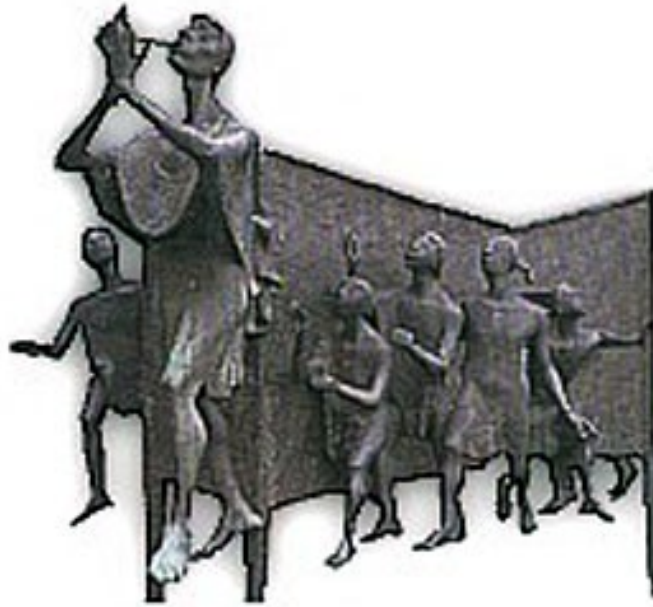


Figure 10. Sculpture commemorating the disappeared children following the pied piper at the Hameln city water fountain.



Figure 11. Painting of Hammeln's children being abducted by the pied piper [1].



Figure 12. Depiction of pied piper and the children of Hammeln [1].

Another interpretation which pertains to the colonization of Eastern Europe starting from Lower Germany, offers another interpretation other than the children's crusade one. The children of Hameln would have been, in those days, citizens willing to migrate after being recruited by landowners to settle in Moravia, East Prussia, Pomerania or in the Teutonic Land.

In past times all people of a town were referred to as "children of the town" or "town children" and this is still frequently practiced today. The "Legend of the Children's Exodus" was later connected to the "Legend of expelling the rats." This most certainly refers to the rat plagues being a great threat in the Medieval milling towns and the more or less successful professional "rat catchers." Some speculate that the pied piper was hired by some sovereign ruler to recruit settlers for the establishment of new colonies in Eastern Europe. One popular version of the tale has the children walk through a tunnel all the way to Transylvania. Some serious research accounts see evidence that the children went to Moravia; the Eastern part of the modern Czech republic.

Other legends and tales of disappearance in swamps, precipices, and various mountains around Hameln have been in circulation for years. Even a theory of abduction by an extraterrestrial pied piper alien has been advanced. Whether it was the children's crusade that caused the disappearance of the 130 Hameln children about 800 years ago, or any other reason, they have become a legend that will not be forgotten. A sculpture commemorating them at Hameln is shown in Fig. 10.

DISCUSSION

A plaque on the stone facade of the Pied Piper house, a half-timbered private residence dating to 1602, like an even earlier one etched on the building's window reads:

“A.D. 1284 – on the 26th of June – the day of St John and St Paul – 130 children – born in Hamelin – were led out of the town by a piper wearing multicolored clothes. After passing the Calvary near the Koppenberg they disappeared forever.”

According to Kadushin [1]:

“What could pass for mere comic relief, though, masks something deeper, and suggests why the legend lives on not only in Hamelin but in enduring folklore. On some level, the tale stokes a primal fear, with the Piper a version of a universal bogey man that continues to haunt us. Parents everywhere still fear the loss of their babies. Children, popping up on the nightly news, still go missing every day. And then we all ultimately vanish in something like an instant. The Piper, in the end, is one very grim reaper.”

“In fact, the date chronicled in all the local documentation pinpoint 26 June as the day the children disappeared. This day is also the date of pagan midsummer celebrations. The fact the documentation also emphasizes that the youth followed the Piper to the Koppen, commonly translated as “hills”, suggest another link. “There were regions in Germany where midsummer was celebrated by lighting fires on the hills,” said Reimer. All that leads to one particularly macabre reading of the Pied Piper legend. Perhaps the Piper, emblematic of a pagan shaman, playing his flute, was leading the youth of Hamelin to their midsummer festivities when the local Christian faction, hoping to cement conversion of the region, waylaid and massacred the group. A less bloody theory: maybe the children were spirited away to local monasteries.”

There are continuing debates about whether the children's crusades actually took place. Some historians believe this was an invented romantic tale designed to demonize the Moslems as trading into slavery the children's crusade participants in the slave markets of Constantinople to set the stage for and gather support for the launching of the upcoming fifth crusade.

REFERENCE

1. Raphael Kadushin, “The grim truth behind the Pied Piper,” BBC, September 3, 2020.