

A SERMON ON STONES? A NOTE ON VOLMAR'S *DAZ STEINBUOCH*

Few modern critics have shown interest in Volmar's *Daz steinbuoch*. However, judged on the evidence of its transmission, this verse lapidary, which was composed about 1250, would appear to be an important work of the German Middle Ages. Some fourteen fragmentary and complete manuscripts of *Daz steinbuoch* have survived into modern times; the oldest of these was possibly produced as early as the 13th century¹. A fragment remains of a first printing of this work (probably in Speier about 1495)² and there are still existing copies of the Erfurt edition, printed in 1498³. Clearly, this German medieval lapidary has been richly transmitted to modern times, which would indicate that it circulated widely during the later Middle Ages. Volmar's work is also believed to have influenced Andreas Jeßner in his accounts of stones in the *Kunstkammer* (1595)⁴. Thus, although *Daz steinbuoch* is only one of a number of medieval works on stones produced in Germany (in German, we also know, for example, of *Das Gedicht vom himmlischen Jerusalem*, the *St. Florianer*

¹ Cf. list of ten mss. in *Das steinbuch. Ein altdeutsches gedicht von Volmar. Mit einleitung, anmerkungen und einem anhang* Hans Lambel (ed.), Heilbronn, 1877; other mss. mentioned in NIEWÖHNER, H. — *Volmar, Verfasser des 'Steinbuchs'*, in «Die deutsche Literatur des Mittelalters. Verfasserlexikon», hrsg. v. Karl Langosch, vol. IV, Berlin, 1953, 718.

² Cf. POYNTER, F. N. L. — *The Editio princeps of Volmar's Steinbuch? An unrecorded incunable*, in «Sudhoffs Archiv für Geschichte der Medizin und der Naturwissenschaften», 44, 1960, pp. 21-24.

³ *Ein wahrhaftig buochlein gar nützlich zu hören: Zw manchen sachen Dar in zu lernen Von der edel tugent vnd krafft wegen dy an den edeln steinen synt... Gedruckt Zw Erfurt... 1498*. Cf. GOEDEKE, Karl — *Grundriß zur Geschichte der deutschen Dichtung aus den Quellen*, Vol. I, Das Mittelalter, 1884, p. 168.

⁴ Cf. EIS, Gerhard — *Andreas Jeßner über die Edelsteine*, in «Sudhoffs Archiv für Geschichte der Medizin und der Naturwissenschaften», Vol. 34, 1941, pp. 68-76.

Steinbuch or Heinrich von Mügeln's *Sprüche*)⁵, its influence would appear to have been significant, since it is still felt at the end the sixteenth century. What reasons can be found for this importance? It is the aim of this brief study to attempt to account for the success of this medieval work.

Those few modern critics who have published studies on Volmar's verse lapidary would appear to agree that this is no great work of scientific scholarship and that it is of doubtful literary quality. Thus, for Niewöhner, this work is "ein (pseudo)wissenschaftliches Verzeichnis der Steine"⁶; Goedecke goes further, to opine that it is "alles voll des crassesten Aberglaubens"⁷. Ehrismann believes Volmar to be "dichterisch wenig begabt..."⁸, while Uhl notes more reservedly: "Poetische Schönheiten sind in dem Büchlein kaum zu finden"⁹.

A brief glance at Volmar's work suffices for us concur with the above expressed opinions on the literary quality of the work: Volmar's *Daz steinbuch* is indeed no masterpiece of medieval German letters. The poem's 1008 rhyming couplets are held together by simple and often repetitive rhymes: thus, for example, *stât* is rhymed with *hât* some seventeen times, while *guot* is rhymed with *bluot* some thirteen times. The language used by Volmar is brittle and lacking in subtlety of expression. In regard to prosody, as Uhl notes: "... die Metrik ist bereits im Sinken"¹⁰: indeed, in *Daz steinbuoch* it is not uncommon to find lines with four stressed syllables and a sonant rhyme. It is clear from the above that Volmar would appear to be no great poet, and therefore, that the popularity of this work would not seem to be not due to its literary merits.

Of course, it is more difficult (one might argue, almost impossible) for us today to say if, judged against contemporary knowledge, Volmar's work might be considered either pseudo-scientific or one crammed with superstition as the abovementioned critics noted. The European Middle Ages are not readily associated with scientific advance and enlightenment. Even Wolfram von Eschenbach, for example, one of Germany's leading, and in many respects most modern of medieval poets, would also appear to

⁵ Cf. LAMBEL — *Op. cit.*, pp. 95-134.

⁶ NIEWÖHNER — *Op. cit.*, p. 717.

⁷ GOEDECKE — *Op. cit.*, p. 167.

⁸ EHRISMANN, Gustav — *Geschichte der deutschen Literatur bis zum Ausgang des Mittelalters*, Vol. II (zweiter Abschnitt, zweite Hälfte), München, 1959, p. 342.

⁹ UHL, W. — *Volmar, der Dichter des Steinbuches*, in «Allgemeine deutsche Biographie», Vol. XIV, Leipzig, 1896, pp. 259-261, here: p. 260.

¹⁰ UHL — *Op. cit.*, p. 260.

have believed in the superstition which surrounds the lore of stones, since in his *Parzival* he refers to 58 stones and their magic powers¹¹. Similarly, references to stones in Heinrich von Veldeke's *Eneit* and Hartmann von Aue's narrative works all demonstrate that belief in the magic powers of stones was widely held even in sophisticated courtly circles. As a — somewhat later — critic of the superstition surrounding stones, Stricker proves to be an exception: in one of his poems¹² he derides the widely held belief in the power of stones: Stricker's attack can be seen as an attempt to enlighten his audience. It is commonly thought that Volmar's lapidary is a riposte to Stricker's poem¹³.

It is well known that medieval lapidaries fall into three categories: the mineralogical, the astrological and the symbolic¹⁴. Volmar's work clearly belongs to that category (the mineralogical) which might be considered more 'scientific', since it attempts to describe the properties of the various stones. As it belongs to this category, *Daz steinbuoch* is part of a tradition which dates back to Pliny the Elder's *Naturalis Historia* (Book XXXVII). Although we do not know the direct source of Volmar's work, it clearly adheres to a convention, which, in medieval terms, might be classified as "scientific"; to us that knowledge might appear pseudo-scientific and superstitious, for the *illiterati* in Volmar's audience, however, his work would be considered scientific, based, to an extent, on received knowledge, and presenting that knowledge in a fashion which might allow them to understand the science. Thus, Volmar's *Daz steinbuoch* could, using today's terminology, be described as "populärwissenschaftlich"; this fact may, to a degree, indeed explain the work's popularity over the centuries.

Thus, we have seen that although *Daz steinbuoch* does not, in all probability, owe its position of importance to its literary merits, the audience of Volmar's work were doubtless impressed with the 'learning' that it presented. I believe, however, that in the structure of this work we

¹¹ The stone lists in *Wolfram von Eschenbach, Parzival*, Karl Lachmann (ed.), Berlin, 1926, 791,1-792,5.

¹² Cf. *Gedicht IX*, in *Kleinere Gedichte von dem Stricker*, ed. K. A. Hahn, Berlin, 1839.

¹³ Thus, the 48 lines of are considered to be an attack on Stricker (cf., among others, Niewöhner, *Op. cit.*, p. 717). It is interesting to note, however, that this introduction is missing in a number of the mss., which begin only on line 68: this might lead us to believe that it was not part of the 'archetype' of the work, and that *Daz steinbuoch* was, therefore, not originally conceived as a reprieve to Stricker's poem.

¹⁴ Cf. *Dictionary of the Middle Ages*, JOSEPH, R. Strayer (ed.), Vol. VII, New York, 1986, p. 342.

can find another motive for the relative success of this lapidary, and I therefore now intend to analyse it more carefully.

Daz steinbuoch lists the names of some thirty-eight different types of stones, in the following order:

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| 1. <i>almendîn</i> (77-84); | 2. <i>topazjus</i> (85-102); |
| 3. <i>smâragdus</i> (103-120); | 4. <i>karfunkelstein</i> (121-132); |
| 5. <i>saphîrus</i> (133-154); | 6. <i>jâchant</i> (155-180); |
| 7. <i>crystal</i> (181-190); | 8. <i>achât</i> (191-214); |
| 9. <i>amatiste</i> (215-228); | 10. <i>crisolîte</i> (229-248); |
| 11. <i>onichînus</i> (249-258); | 12. <i>jaspis</i> (259-280); |
| 13. <i>diamant</i> (289-340); | 14. <i>kappenstein</i> (341-354); |
| 15. <i>corniôl</i> (355-360); | 16. <i>coral</i> (361-372); |
| 17. <i>etite</i> (373-406); | 18. <i>swalwenstein</i> (407-424); |
| 19. <i>ciriôn</i> (425-444); | 20. <i>elitrôpie</i> (445-456); |
| 21. <i>krotenstein</i> (457-478); | 22. <i>geracite</i> (479-496); |
| 23. <i>calofôn</i> (497-506); | 24. <i>berle</i> (507-514); |
| 25. <i>victres</i> (515-536); | 26. <i>optaljes</i> (537-550); |
| 27. <i>turkois</i> (551-556); | 28. <i>orîtes</i> (557-564); |
| 29. <i>calcedôn</i> (565-570); | 30. <i>sardjus</i> (571-582); |
| 31. <i>flammât</i> (583-586); | 32. <i>magnât</i> (587-628); |
| 33. <i>kâmahû</i> (629-642); | 34. <i>rubîn</i> (643-650); |
| 35. <i>balas</i> (651-654); | 36. <i>crispopras</i> (655-668); |
| 37. <i>grânât-rôter jâchant</i> (669-674); | 38. <i>diâcodâ</i> (675-702). |

Other lapidaries in German also list stones in a similiar fashion. The *St. Florianer Steinbuch*, for example, records thirty-six stones, some of which do not appear in Volmar's list (e.g. *carbunculus*; *celidonium*), and those which do appear are in a completely different order: in the *St. Florianer Steinbuch* there is, however, little attempt to explain *why* the list of stones has been organized in a certain way, or indeed, why these and not other stones have been included in the collection. Not so in Volmar's work: here, the author has attempted not simply to list the stones, but to divide the list into different parts, and to provide an introduction and a conclusion, which justify their incorporation in the list. The text of Volmar's *Daz steinbuoch* is divided as follows:

- I. Introduction (1-76):
 - i) attack on those who deny the power of stones;
 - ii) the ten commandments were written on stones;
 - iii) the high-priest Aaron wore twelve stones.
- II. List of Aaron's twelve stones and their powers (77-280).
- III. Twenty-six stones and their powers (281-702).
- IV. Nameless stones and their powers (703-770).
- V. Gem images and their powers (771-986).
- VI. Conclusion (987-1008):
 - i) only the best stones have been described here;
 - ii) God will punish those who speak ill of stones.

This structure would suggest that the thirty-eight stones named in Volmar's lapidary have not been included at random. Of particular importance are the twelve stones at the beginning of Volmar's list, since they are cited in the Bible, and therefore I believe, give the account greater credibility.

The author's knowledge of biblical matters has led Uhl to suggest that Volmar was a cleric, and that his reason for composing *Daz steinbuoch* is to be found in the necessity he felt to protect old beliefs: the "battle of letters" between Stricker and Volmar is seen as a precursor of the Reformation, with the former as a representative of enlightenment, and the latter as one whose interest it is to protect learning which has been handed down: "Dem Kleriker ... muß nothwendig daran liegen, das Alte zu bewahren"¹⁵. This certainly is an attractive theory, but not, I believe, obviously upheld by the text. The possibility that Volmar is a cleric is, however, more readily acceptable, indeed, I believe that it is possible to see reflexes of the rhetorical skills of the cleric Volmar in his treaty on stones.

As was noted above, the reference to the biblical character Aaron and the use he made of stones is important, since it lends to Volmar's text the authority of God's word. Volmar would here appear to be using the Scripture to provide apodeictic proof for his assertions; the fact that Volmar can end his account explaining that God will punish those who do not respect the power of stones would appear to uphold this viewpoint. In many ways, Volmar's text thereby resembles a sermon, in that the Scripture is cited as an "authority" which explains and proves the propositions set out incontrovertibly. It is interesting to note that the structure of *Daz*

¹⁵ UHL — *Op. cit.*, p. 260.

steinbuoch is similar to that propounded by authors of treatises on the modes of preaching written in the early and middle thirteenth century: these treatises were themselves developed from ancient and Judaic traditions. For Alexander of Ashby, for example, there are four parts to a homily: prologue, division, proof and conclusion¹⁶. As Murphy notes, these treatises were not written in order to establish new forms of preaching, but rather reflected those modes of preaching which already existed¹⁷. Common to all these works on the *ars prædicandi* is the necessity, in a sermon, to provide apodeictic proof of the arguments advanced, by citing the Holy Scripture.

Volmar's *Daz steinbuoch* is clearly not a sermon; however, it does seem to have a structure not far removed from that used by preachers. Preachers preach in order to persuade. In his work, Volmar obviously wishes to convince his audience of the importance of stones; he is a cleric and as such, the rhetorical device with which he would be most familiar in order to win over his audience would be that of the homily. The form of the homily would, as a model, appear to reach beyond the limits of Christian preaching, since, for society around 1250, it was associated with the possibility of expounding a theory and of convincing an audience of its validity. In using the structure of the sermon Volmar may not have been adapting it consciously: indeed, it would appear that Volmar is here using a structure which is omnipresent in medieval texts. It is possible that the medieval audience, for whom *Daz steinbuoch* was clearly important, recognised this rhetorical device used by Volmar, and were stimulated — and convinced — by it.

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¹⁶ Cf. MURPHY, James J. — *Rhetoric in the Middle Ages. A History of Rhetorical Theory from Saint Augustine to the Renaissance*, Berkley, 1974, p. 313.

¹⁷ Cf. MURPHY — *Op. cit.*, p. 312.